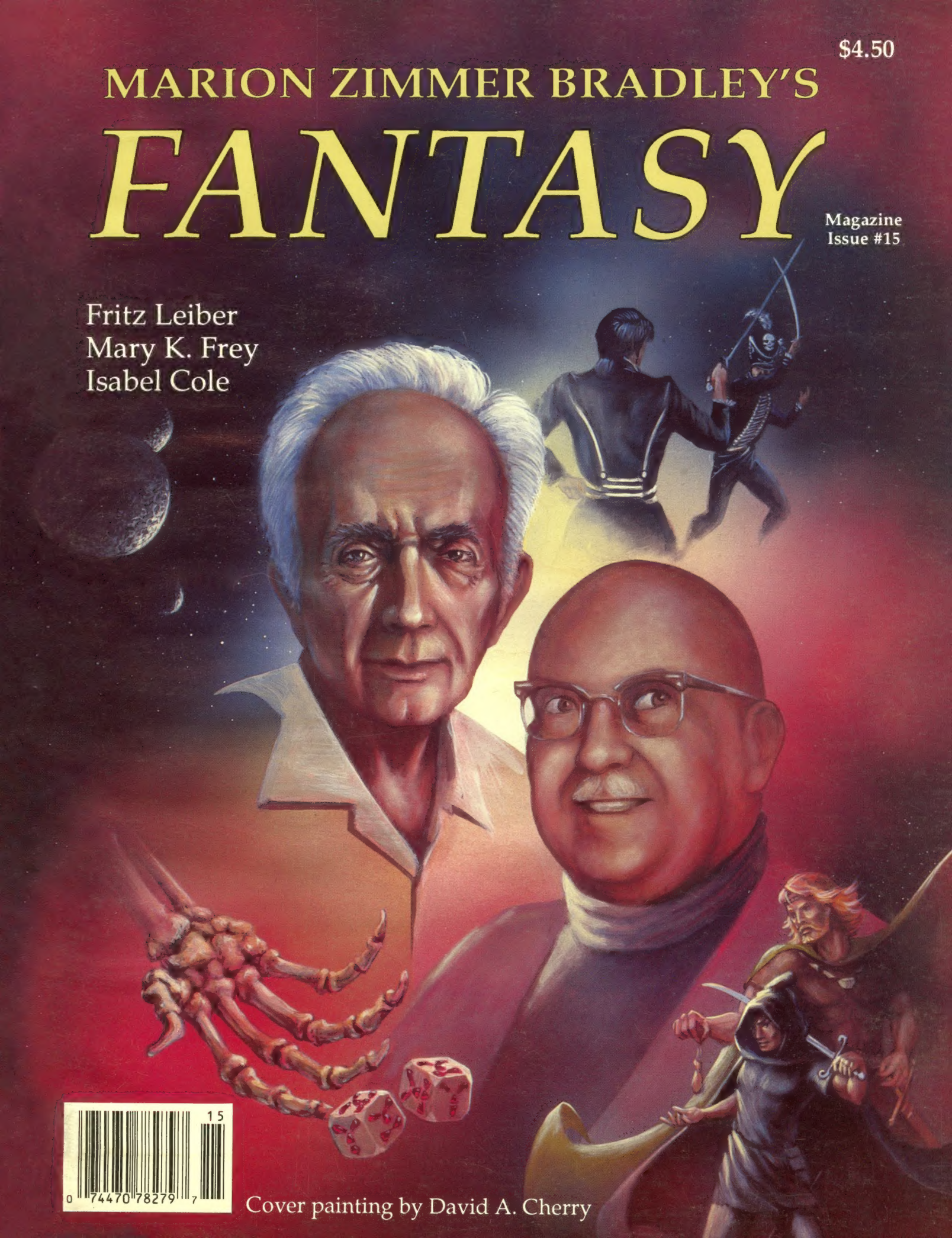
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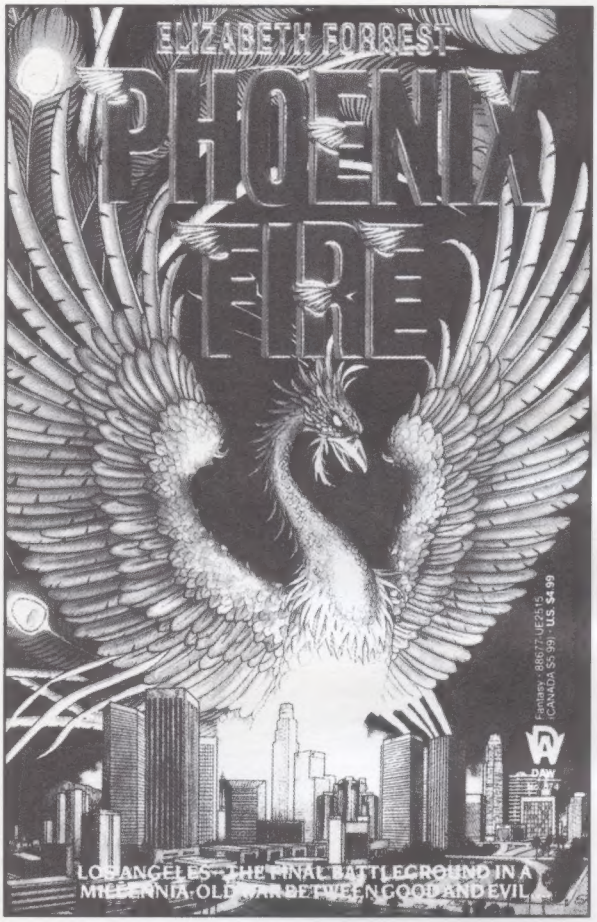
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EDITOR AND PUBLISHER
Marion Zimmer Bradley

MANAGING EDITOR
Rachel E. Holmen

DESIGN
Art Weller

CLERICAL ASSISTANCE
Raul Reyes
Jane Robinson
Lawrence Schimel

PROOFREADING
Gil Lamont
Debbie Notkin
Alan Bostick

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

Excellence or Elitism?

In this country we seem — of course there are exceptions — to have a passion for the successful. At its worst, this means that no movie succeeds unless it's on the Oscar nominees at least; no song is successful until it's on the Top Ten; a Broadway show must be a hit; no book is successful until it makes the New York Times Bestseller list — I could continue, but I'll spare you.

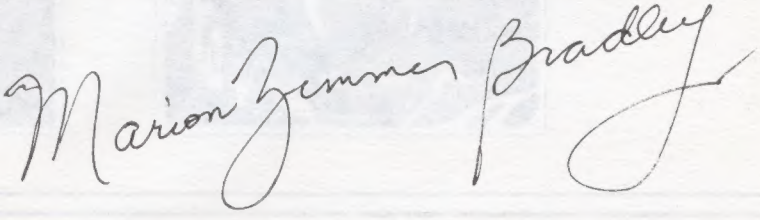
There is a flip side — and a beneficial side — of this. TV has at least banished what somebody called the "overtrained parlor soprano" from Midwestern living rooms, and with the Olympics on every TV screen we don't have to spend our Saturday afternoons watching the local high school basketball games. Good entertainment drives out bad.

But there's a down side to this. I, for my sins, once worked for a feminist magazine which, with its editors, shall be nameless. (This is, of course, why I am not a doctrinaire feminist — at least not most of the time.) These editors made it known to their underlings, including me, that we had no right to judge the quality of submissions. "Women," they stated categorically, "have seen too much rejection." You can imagine the quality of what they printed — because unfortunately there are almost as many incompetent and uninteresting female writers as male ones. And right here in the s-f community, a well-known feminist writer has been heard to bemoan the fact that women must be "better than men". "When," she lamented rhetorically, "will women be permitted to be mediocre?" I wasn't too sympathetic; I think there are already too many bad writers among men; we didn't need to add multitudes of incompetent women. Among the really good writers, as I've said often, I never knew an editor who knew or cared whether I were a woman, a man, or a chimpanzee in skirts with a typewriter. Some women don't believe this; but it's true.

Somebody once asked me, when I refused to attend a concert by a woefully bad musical rock band, why I wasn't willing to support women's music. I replied that when Shirley Verrett — a black singer of great merit — gave a concert, I'd be right there in the first row. But misplaced feminist support for mediocrity just diminished everybody's respect for excellence; I disliked incompetent male rock musicians at least as much as I disliked female ones, if not more.

The real down side of this is that it is much harder for young people to get a start. My daughter, a gifted harpist, has to struggle more at her age than I ever did for success as a writer; music is the only field more difficult than writing in which, unknown, to make a start. Shirley Chisholm, a black politician, in her book UNBOUGHT AND UNBOSSED, put her career on the line to remain her own woman. Paul Tsongas has just dropped out of the presidential race for lack of funds. I edited anthologies in a day when the conventional wisdom said that short stories don't sell; I'm still here. I was lucky when I started — and no matter what anyone says, I never sold out to a mythical male "establishment".

And I started this magazine partly to give young writers a chance — within reason. But that doesn't mean I don't insist on good stories. If that makes me an elitist, so be it.



MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY Magazine

Issue 15 Winter 1992

Page 16

Page 21

COVER STORY

H.P. Lovecraft Meets Fafhrd and The Gray Mouser 4
by Fritz Leiber

Harimau 11
by Shymala Dason; art by Vincent Di Fate

Wanted, One Virgin 16
by Thomas D. Sadler; art by James Balkovek

What Happy Ending? 21
by Lyn McConchie; art by George Barr

Page 11

Page 34

Fylgja 24
by Heather Lynn Sarik; art by Rob Alexander

Sea King's Harp 34
by Mary K. Frey; art by Alan Gutierrez

Changes 42
by David R. Addleman; art by Gail Butler

Queen of Summer Forests 48
by Isabel Cole; art by Margaret Organ-Kean

To Be The Best 54
by Margarita Serbiá; art by Barb Armata

All's Fair 60
by G. E. Gaines; art by Janet Kramer

Regular Features

An Interview with Fritz Leiber 7
by Darrell Schweitzer

Marion Zimmer Bradley
Talks to Writers 32
What I Reject – and Why

Writers Talk Balk 33
Prose and Cons: Rejection Slips

Results of the Cauldron 23

Letters to the Editor 47

The Last Word by Rachel E. Holmen 63

The Cauldron 64

H.P. Lovecraft Meets Fafhrd and The Gray Mouser

by Fritz Leiber

I first got in touch with Howard Phillips Lovecraft through the unasked help of my wife, Jonquil, who knew how highly I valued his supernatural horror stories. She simply wrote him a letter (I lacked the nerve to do this), telling him of our great enthusiasm for his tales.

At that time, we were living with my father and mother in Beverly Hills, California, where my father was beginning a career in the movies, while Lovecraft was at his home in Providence, Rhode Island. She wrote him in care of the magazine *Astounding Stories*, which had recently published his novel **THE SHADOW OUT OF TIME**.

Her letter was a long time reaching him. His reply, which arrived in November 1936, was thoughtful and amiable.

Jonquil had mentioned that I acted in my father's Shakespearean company, and it turned out that earlier HPL had seen my father when he was acting in Robert Mantell's Shakespeare company, and had many favorable memories of Leiber, Sr., particularly in the part of Faulconbridge in *KING JOHN*, in which he had some great speeches about his devotion to England.

I was overjoyed at the friendly contact my wife had made for me, and I immediately wrote Lovecraft a long letter myself, telling him in more detail of my great admiration for his works.

Our correspondence flourished, and I eventually sent him my unpublished long novella "Adept's Gambit", about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and several poems that were eventually published in **DEMONS OF THE UPPER AIR**. He responded favorably, sending me a long commentary on the novella. He knew to a tee how to encourage a budding fantasy writer of whom he approved, always including words of praise to balance each criticism. Eventually, he asked my permission to circulate "Adept's Gambit" among his circle of fantasy-writing friends.

Our correspondences all continued to flourish. Lovecraft and I exchanged long letters on fantasy writing. I didn't realize it fully at the time, but I was laying out plans for a lifetime of such writing under the gentle guidance of an author deeply interested in the whole field.

Lovecraft continued to write separately to my wife, who very tactfully asked him more practical questions: how he earned a living, managed his social life, queries like that. He responded very fully and frankly, telling us how he needed only five hundred dollars a year to maintain himself in a thrifty style to which he was becoming accustomed, how he made do with old clothes, and required only two or three dollars a week for food, divided between breakfast and dinner. Breakfast consisted, for example, of a donut and some cheese washed down with heavily sugared coffee; dinner was a can of beans or Chef Boyardee meatballs and spaghetti.

Meanwhile, another figure had entered the correspondence circle. Before Christmas of 1936, I introduced Lovecraft to my lifelong friend Harry Otto Fischer of Louisville, Kentucky. He had originally invented the characters of Fafhrd, modeled on me, and the Gray Mouser, modeled on himself. Harry and HPL exchanged several letters, particularly on the subject of fear. Harry claimed that supernatural horror stories did not frighten him, though he was often entertained by their grotesqueries. Lovecraft asserted that *his* fears stemmed from nightmares of childhood during which he was often kidnapped by winged faceless creatures who whirled him through dreadful panoramas to the ends of the universe.

I somehow found time to do a series of illustrations for Lovecraft's story "The Whisperer In Darkness". These consisted of huge buildings silhouetted against starfields crossed by silhouetted flying figures. This was my Christmas present to Lovecraft. He responded with a gift to me and Jonquil of a privately printed copy of his short story "The Cats of Ulthar", dedicated to our two cats, Mumphet and Grayface.

At the same time, Harry and Jonquil and I were commenting to each other about the very exciting time we were all going through.

I remember Harry being shocked by Lovecraft's diet and saying he should be provided with fresh vegetables.

Harry, incidentally, spent much of this period isolated with his wife Martha and his parents in their house, besieged by floodwaters, having been

inundated for a fortnight to the first floor level. There was even a time when it was thought the Ohio River was changing its course to run through Louisville.

Almost fifty years later, my memories of this period were sharply reawakened by the publication of the fifth and last volume of Lovecraft's **SELECTED LETTERS** by Arkham House in 1970. This contained a long letter to his friend James F. Morton, published for the first time, which HPL was working on at the time of his death (March 15, 1937). I'll quote from it at some length because it expresses his view of the period:

"This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud Foot of a Conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.
Now these her Princes are come home again,
Come the Three Corners of the World in Arms,
And we shall shock them. Nought shall make
us rue
If England to itself do rest but true!

"I had the privilege of hearing these lines on the actual boards a quarter of a century ago when Robert Mantell's repertory company played Providence, and ever afterwards associated them with the extremely gifted young actor who spoke them in the part of the bastard Faulconbridge – a chap named Fritz Leiber, who handled all such secondary roles as Horatio, Mercutio, Iago, Macduff, Richmond, Edgar, Bassanio, Antony, and so on. I used to think that Leiber was really better than Mantell himself – for the latter was getting egotistical, self-conscious, and stagey. Well – I lately had occasion to revive those ancient memories, when I received (through *Astounding Stories*) a communication from *Fritz Leiber's son and namesake* – a fanatical and scholarly devotee of weird fiction and the aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical background behind it. Young Fritz (twenty-five, a University of Chicago graduate, and entering his father's profession) has one of the keenest minds I have ever encountered, and in the interval since last November has become one of the star correspondents on my desperately crowded list. His understanding of the profound emotions behind the groping for cosmic concepts surpasses that of almost anyone else with whom I've discussed the matter; and his own tales and poems, while not without marks of the beginner, show infinite insight and promise. Papa's genius certainly reached the second generation in this case – for whether or not Fritz Jun. equals his sire on the boards, he'll certainly get somewhere in literature if he keeps on at his present rate. He has had classic thespian experience – having played in his father's companies (which have never visited Providence) in recent years those self-same roles (Edgar, Iago, etc.) which in my day old Fritz himself played in Mantell's companies. Incidentally, I saw old Fritz in two cinemas last year – the Pasteur opera and ***ANTHONY ADVERSE***. Young Fritz had a momentary bit in the current Camille film – which I have not seen. Pater et filius reside together (though young Fritz has a wife) in Beverly Hills, California – the same town with young Henry Kuttner. Young Fritz resembles his parent – who, by the way, is an amateur sculptor of much talent, with some remarkable Shakespearean busts to his credit. The son's artistic ability is manifest in something he sent me for Christmas – a series of strangely potent and macabre illustrations for some of my tales. These designs were produced by a novel and original process which the artist-inventor calls 'splatter-stencil work', and they convey surprisingly vivid effects in a semi-futuristic way. The best is probably one showing the Eastward flight of certain winged entities from nighted Yuggoth – illustrating "The Whisperer In Darkness". There will shortly be circulated among the gang (you can be on the list if you like) a remarkable unpublished novelette by young Leiber – 'Adept's Gambit', rejected by Wright and now under revision according to my suggestions. It is a very brilliant piece of fantastic imagination – with suggestions of Cabell, Beckford, Dunsany, and even Two-Gun Bob *[Robert E. Howard – Ed.]* – and ought to see publication someday. Being wholly out of the cheap tradesman tradition, it has small chance of early magazine placement – hence the idea of circulation amongst the members of the circle. This novelette is part of a very unusual myth-cycle spontaneously evolved in the correspondence of young Leiber and his closest friend – Harry O. Fischer of lately-inundated Louisville. Fischer has also come within my congested epistolary circle, and is in some ways even more remarkable than Leiber – he has more imaginative fertility, though less concentrated emotional power and philosophic insight. Their myth-cycle, originally started by Fischer, involves my own pantheon of Yog-Sothoth, Cthulhu, etc., and revolves around the adventures of two roving characters (Fafhrd, the Viking, modelled after Leiber – who is six feet four – and the Gray Mouser, modelled after the diminutive Fischer) in a vague congeries of fabulous and half-fabulous worlds of the remote past. Fischer's parts of this cycle are vivid but unformulated and disjointed, so that at present Leiber – the better craftsman – is the only publicly visible author of the pair. 'Adept's Gambit' is laid in the Syria of the earlier Hellenistic period, but soon moves away from Tyre and Ephesus to a fabulous mountain realm of inland Asia. Fischer's wife is an accomplished artist, and has made several very effective pastel drawings of some of the inconceivable Entities in the Fafhrd-Mouser Cycle."

In March of the next year, we were shocked and astounded by the suddenness of Lovecraft's death. He had spent a couple of days in the hospital at the end of '36. Thereafter, his replies to Jonquil and myself shrank to one-page letters and postcards. He was still taking regular walks, weather permitting, wearing a pair of shoes that had been cut to accommodate his swollen feet. He still talked of his illness as an attack of grippe. When he became unable to help himself, he went to the hospital a second time, for the last week or so of his life. We got the news from his aunt, Mrs. Gamwell, who later, at his direction, returned our letters to him, and also sent us a small ruby-glass mug which he had received as a present on his tenth birthday. It became one of my lifetime's treasured possessions, and was finally sold at auction around 1980 to contribute to a fund to pay the last medical expenses of Manly Wade Wellman, another early *Weird Tales* writer.

My final reaction at the time was of wonder and admiration for a writer who had been able to create such long and instructive letters as Lovecraft had during November and December of the previous year, when he was clearly sick to death, and I embarked on a revision of "Adept's Gambit" introducing the names of such Lovecraftian entities as Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep. I showed the resulting manuscript to my wife and to my friend Harry, who emphatically did not like the changes, and so I deleted them when the story was published (in 1947). I also eliminated a trail they follow through the atmosphere to the Castle Called Mist, a touch of realism which I would now include.

Two years later my wife and I were

back in Chicago, where I had a job writing articles on science for Consolidated Book Publishers' *University of Knowledge*, a series of books sold at a dollar apiece through newspaper advertisements, an early competitor in the World Book Encyclopedia field.

Meanwhile, the magazine *Unknown* had been launched in New York by Street and Smith. I had tried to sell "Adept's Gambit" to several book publishers and also to *Weird Tales* but had met with rejections. I decided to write a new Fafhrd-Mouser story shaped more to the needs of the action-adventure pulp magazine.

In search of buried treasure in a fabulous world, my two heroes encounter an old castle that promises what they are looking for, but is really a trap. In other words, they find the treasure but are almost destroyed by its supernatural guardian. Along the way, rival treasure-seekers provide plenty of sword fights and excitement.

This story sold on its first submission to *Unknown*, which seemed to me a superior market to *Weird Tales*. I had written and submitted it without any previous consultation with Harry Fischer, so it was published under my name alone.

Harry, meanwhile, had found a career with the General Box Company of Louisville, Kentucky. He started in the factory and soon became a designer of boxes.

Although we had conceived and developed the characters of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser and their ancient land of Lankhmar on the shores of the Inner Sea together, we had somehow never thought of writing as a team but conceived of it as a literary property we could both exploit individually. I always thought he was the better writer, but I made the compromise of adapting to the pulp market. It wasn't until many years later, in the '60s, that I took 10,000 words he had written and developed them into a story for both our names.

Looking back, it seems to me that Lovecraft had a greater influence on my writing than he did on Harry Fischer's (much more than I realized at the time). After my correspondence with Lovecraft I forever conceived of Fafhrd and the Mouser stories as adventures in the realm of cosmic horror, colliding with them in each story with varying results, while Harry Fischer resisted this element in Lovecraft more strongly than I did. This distinction is preserved in the characters of the two heroes – Fafhrd being the more romantic and susceptible to illusion, while the Mouser remains more of a realist. Read "The Lords of Quarmall", in which Harry's contributions are clearly distinguishable from my own. ❧

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TURNING PAGE

An Interview with Fritz Leiber

by Darrell Schweitzer

You've been publishing now for fifty-one years and it's hard to imagine you doing anything else. Looking back over things, can you see how your life could have gone any other way, and you might have been something other than a writer?

It's hard now to think of its going any other way, my becoming an actor or something else. I'm certainly happiest that I've become a writer, and thank God I seem to have stayed a writer. I've been very, very fortunate in having such a large audience and such a variety of audience. It's been very good.

You started writing a little later in life than most people do. What were your interests then, and what made you suddenly start writing?

Well, I think I needed a lot of push and some definite encouragement. I think that the first thing really that made me a writer was someone to talk to, the emergence of an individual audience, someone my own age whom I wanted to be friends with, and I found it in my friend Harry Fischer. He was the original of the Gray Mouser. In fact he invented the two characters, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, to describe his feelings about himself and me. I was the good friend, the great friend, and so was he. That was the way we started out. I think that is the reason I've kept on writing so faithfully about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. He was my first audience, and he was a better writer than I was. He was a much more developed writer at that time than I was. So I had to work hard to equal him, to come anywhere close to him. This was a good thing for me. It put me on my level from the start. I had to equal my friend. When he wrote letters that were twenty and thirty pages long, I had to get my letters more than four or five *lines* long. This was the challenge I needed.

At first you were writing letters back and forth, describing Fafhrd, the Mouser, and their world. At what point did this become a formal attempt to write stories for publication?

That was a question: getting, finding a suitable market. We weren't so conscious of the need at first to finish the stories. It was well enough to inhabit a world where the stories didn't have to be finished. We'd just start them and pile on the atmosphere with no thought of someday having to finish it off. We weren't thinking in those terms.

What else were you doing with your life at this time? Were you doing any acting?

I was acting in my father's company. It was a made job, as it was, and it was a job I didn't have to make any effort toward, because he had his company out and I was of an age to act in it, so I had a job. My friend Harry Fischer, he didn't have a job. He'd just gotten married, and he and his wife had a puppet show, which they took out for all of three weeks after their marriage. They were going to tour this puppet show around the countryside. But it was not to be. This was around 1934, in the depths of the Depression, and so Harry and Martha's puppet show never paid off. They were in farming communities where the people paid in vegetables, if anything. So that didn't work out, and Harry went back to Louisville with his wife, and there he got a job with the General Box Company. He started a career of first making, and then designing, boxes to contain various products.

Had he any further inclination to become a writer?

He did eventually, in later life, when he lost his job with the box company, which happened in the middle of his career.

I had to equal my friend Harry. When he wrote letters that were twenty and thirty pages long, I had to get my letters more than four or five *lines* long.

About the time you began writing, you came into contact with H.P. Lovecraft. Surely that was a great inspiration.

Oh yes. This also happened before my actual writing — my actual *selling* — career began. I didn't have the nerve to write him, but my then-wife did. Her name was Jonquil. She died in 1969. But she was the one who first wrote Lovecraft, and as soon

as Lovecraft answered her letter, why, I wrote him with the greatest enthusiasm, to tell him how much I enjoyed his stories. We began a tremendous correspondence, Lovecraft and I.

How many of your stories did he see? He speaks well of you as a writer in some of his letters.

He saw "Adept's Gambit", the first long Fafhrd and Mouser story, and besides that he saw some poems I wrote, which were published later as the short collection **DEMONS OF THE UPPER AIR**.

I knew a lot about fear from myself. For me the supernatural horror story was basically a story about the things I was or had been afraid of, like the dark and the unknown.

You mentioned once that there were Cthulhu Mythos elements in a version of "Adept's Gambit".

Yes. In my enthusiasm for Lovecraft I did a version of "Adept's Gambit" which had invocations to Shub-Niggurath and appeals to Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep and so on. But I realized later that this was just a desire to emulate Lovecraft.

Yet, unlike Robert Bloch or Henry Kuttner, you did not begin your career writing distinctly Lovecraftian stories. You declared your artistic independence early.

I felt that Lovecraft was another writer and my stories wouldn't necessarily be a great deal like his. So at first I had no thought of writing supernatural horror stories; except that the Fafhrd and Mouser stories were basically supernatural horror.

What did you first plan to write then? Perhaps more straight adventure stories on the order of Talbot Mundy?

I wanted to write stories like the Fafhrd and Mouser stories were, and they were supernatural horror. They were to that extent like Lovecraft. Supernatural horror was the center of interest in them.

Yet in a couple years you were writing science fiction. How did this change come about?

That was just another thing. I certainly admired science fiction, but I had trouble writing it at first. The supernatural horror stories came much easier. I think it is because the supernatural story is of simpler structure. You have the phenomenon that is feared and you have the hero of the story who is menaced by the horror, and then the other characters are just observers. So it was a simple thing, relatively, for me to write a supernatural horror story, because all I needed was something to be feared. I knew a lot about fear from myself. For me the supernatural horror story was basically a story about the things I was or had been afraid of, like the dark and the unknown. So I was able to write the horror story. But the science fiction story required a whole social scene. This demanded more of me than I had at first.

But you did manage to produce sf fairly quickly. How much did John W. Campbell help you?

John Campbell was certainly a help. The story of "The Jewels in the Forest" or "Two Sought Adventure" was written for Campbell's *Unknown*. I had checked that, and I realized something as a source of terror for an *Unknown* story, and I found it in architecture, in the idea of a building that was alive, an apparently ancient place in the forest which turned out to be an *alive building*. So I had the tremendous image of the tower beating down on the two heroes.

Campbell was famous for feeding ideas to his writers and shaping their careers. He gave Heinlein at least one novel idea. Did he do that with you?

He did, but afterward. The first story was just a gift from the gods. He had nothing to do with "The Jewels in the Forest". But then later on he began to feed me ideas. My first long weird story, **CONJURE WIFE**, was written in response to his suggestion to me that women were a good source for the elements in the horror story. What did they carry around in those handbags of theirs? The obvious answer, materials for witchcraft, was a very potent one, because it did suggest the whole story of **CONJURE WIFE**. And I happened to be at my first formal job at the time. I was on a college faculty and I was having my first experience with college faculty politics, the maneuverings, the slight kowtowings to the heads of departments.

What did your wife think of the idea of the novel?

She was a great help. She was very enthusiastic, because she had the background for it. She was from Wales. She was a British girl whom I met in Chicago, but she had just moved there from Wales, which was, again, a place where you could think of witchcraft as being possibly true and powerful. So I got the idea that the hero would be helped by his wife, who believed in all this stuff, though he didn't believe in it at all. She would pick his brain for the anthropological material he had on witchcraft, and she would use witchcraft to defend him and to promote his career. When she did she gradually found out that the other women on the faculty had long been operating under the same principle, that they were using witchcraft to defend their husbands. And so it went.

My wife had just moved from Wales, a place where you could think of witchcraft as being possibly true and powerful.

*You've shown a great fascination with witchcraft throughout your career, from your very earliest stories up to such recent works as **THE KNIGHT AND KNAVE OF SWORDS**. Care to comment?*

Yes. I have had a great fascination with witches. I'd say that our modern witchcraft has developed, in a sense, with me. As I've grown interested in the topic, it has become of greater interest to men and women throughout the world. There's been the whole modern witchcraft movement, which really dates back to the years just after World War II, when witchcraft ceased to be a criminal act in England. It was punishable by law until quite recently. So there was a great promotion of witchcraft in the 1950s. When I wrote **CONJURE WIFE** in the early 1940s, witchcraft was a pretty obscure thing. You had to at least refer to *The American Weekly* as the source of information on the topic. The Sunday supplements.

*Or perhaps books like **THE WITCH-CULT IN THE WESTERN WORLD** by Margaret Murray.*

Yes.

I take it you get along well with witches.

Yes. I accept the witches around me in San Francisco. I've visited a coven out there and shared their full moon meetings,

things like that. That's the way it was especially when I was writing "The Mouser Goes Below", which is in many ways a witchcraft story.

But you haven't encountered any malevolent witches, the sort who probably mostly exist in fiction.

No, I haven't. Most of the witches I know out in San Francisco are just practising heathens, or pagans, who practice or believe in several cults. They're pantheistic, you might say. They have a pantheon of gods who are rather like the gods of the Norse or the Greeks.

Let's turn to your science fiction now. Curiously, your first major science fiction story was also about witches. I mean, of course, GATHER, DARKNESS! Could you tell us how that came about.

GATHER, DARKNESS! was suggested by **CONJURE WIFE**, and also, I think, by Heinlein's story, **SIXTH COLUMN**. You remember it. So I said, let's go one step further. The scientists wouldn't just use their power to rescue people from exploitation. They would use it to exploit also. The only way to counter them would be to start a witchcraft based on science.

At the time John Campbell had an unpublished and somewhat unfinished novelette called "All", which was the basis for the Heinlein novel. He apparently showed it to Heinlein and said, "I'm Editor now. You write this." Did he ever show it to you?

No. I didn't see that.

But it seems that what Campbell really contributed to your development as a writer was that he got you to write novels, instead of short stories. Your first three novels appeared in his magazines. How much did you learn about novel-writing from him?

I think I learned a great deal about it. I wrote **CONJURE WIFE** and **GATHER, DARKNESS!** and then **DESTINY TIMES THREE** definitely for Campbell.

Yet by the early 1950s you were primarily writing for other editors. How did this change come about?

I tried to write steadily for Campbell, but I think that the change came about when I got the idea for **THE BIG TIME**, which I wrote for *Galaxy*. Horace Gold, the editor of *Galaxy*, liked the idea of the novel, and he bought it. At the same time I was selling a short story based on the same world, "Try and Change the Past", to Campbell. This created some ill will between myself and Campbell.

But more than that, the whole approach of the two stories is quite different. "Try and Change the Past" is more realistic and almost a gimmick story, whereas THE BIG TIME is very theatrical and has what are almost Brechtian distancing-devices in it. It's very different in sensibilities from anything Astounding *would publish. So, was this a matter of your horizons broadening, or Campbell's narrowing?*

I don't know. It was mine broadening, I think, that brought it about. But I think the fact that he had bought a short story which seemed to be based on the same idea of a change-war between rivals in space and time, between mega-cultures, was more the issue.

In essence, he didn't want the rest of the series running in someone else's magazine.

Yes.

The theatrical quality of THE BIG TIME does bring us back to the influence of theater on your writing. Could you talk about this? A lot of your stories do read like plays.

Well, that's true. I have tended to think of them as plays. But that's a matter of appearances more than anything else.

Have you ever wanted to write for the stage?

Mine hasn't been the sort of writing that leads to actual sales in movies and plays.

Well, CONJURE WIFE has been filmed twice, for all you weren't directly involved. Were you ever approached to write a screenplay for something like that?

I have tried to do it, but it hasn't worked out. I've tried to write a Fafhrd and Mouser movie, but it hasn't worked out.

The problem is perhaps that movies and TV require too much committee-work...?

Yes, I think that is a great deal of it. I've always been very much a lone-wolf writer and worker.

Far removed from both most of the Fafhrd and Mouser series and things like CONJURE WIFE, you've also written a lot of overtly satirical work, such as A SPECTER IS HAUNTING TEXAS. This represents a further broadening of your work. So, how did you go from writing supernatural horror to writing social satire?

I can't always tell you that. I wish I could. I think it's been a matter of changing my focus.

Lovecraft toward the end of his life felt that the most ominous thing for the United States was the dominance of big business, that this was the greatest threat to progress.

This ability to change focus must surely be one of your greatest strengths. You must have noticed how many writers of, say, the 1940s, who were regarded as your equals then, haven't been heard from since. Hardly names to conjure with — Nelson Bond or Cleve Cartmill or Raymond F. Jones — and then there were so many writers prominently published in the 1950s, and they haven't been heard from since. And so on. Yet you keep changing and growing.

I think my greatest strength has been in the actual writing, in my handling of the subject-matter. It's a *literary* accomplishment.

But you're writing very differently now from what you were doing in the 1940s.

Yes.

Most writers, after a while, stop changing. They're probably wondering what your secret is.

It's just to keep on trying to be different.

Have you ever felt the kind of commercial pressure where the publisher demands another book just like the last one?

No. This hasn't happened to me. They're more apt to say, "We want more just like it."

((Laughter from audience.))

Leiber continues: That's true.

Oh, I don't know. I'd think it would be a tried and tested product by now.

You really think so? Apparently it hasn't worked that way for me.

But virtually everything you've written is still in print.

Yes, one way or another. That's true. And, thank you. But I think it's for literary, for story value that it's read.

So what we are seeing here is the triumph of artistry over mass-production.

Yes, I would say so.

But there are so many writers who say, "Well, this is a trend, so I'll write more of those ...and more and more and more." This has always struck me as a short-sighted way to do it. You must be living proof that I'm right.

I think that is true.

Looking back over all that you've done, is there any particular story which is your favorite?

Oh, I have several favorites. Among the Fafhrd and Mouser stories, I particularly like "Lean Times in Lankhmar" and "Bazaar of the Bizarre".

Any particular reason for those two?

"Lean Times in Lankhmar" is a great comedy of Fafhrd's alcoholism and the Mouser's fascination with money-making. And also it turned out to be a comedy of religion in a way.

This will never go out of style, because the subject matter is so universal. But won't some satires date out from under you, such as A SPECTER IS HAUNTING TEXAS, which is largely about Lyndon Johnson?

I was hoping...but he didn't run for president again, which was a problem.

((Laughter from audience.))

But there was something universally grotesque about him, so the novel still works.

That's true.

How did you come to write this novel?

I decided to do my bit to stop Goldwater, so I supported Lyndon Johnson, and found that all I'd done was help to escalate the war in Vietnam. This put me off politics, while trying to work in politics myself. I saw how poor a judge I was.

So you'd never be tempted to write a science fiction novel about Ronald Reagan, for all he seems to be a very science fiction subject...?

It's tremendously tempting.

Are you writing anything just now?

Not right now. But this may help inspire me. I'd say that.

This convention, or Ronald Reagan?

This convention.

Selected Questions from the Audience:

Having survived now through almost six decades of writing in the field, you must have some ideas about what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong. Could you offer some thoughts on this?

Lovecraft toward the end of his life felt that the most ominous thing for the United States was the dominance of big business, that this was the greatest threat to healthy progress in this country. When I see our president devoting himself so much to the fortunes of the oil companies in the Mideast, I cannot but say that he was possibly right in his judgment.

((Applause.))

Is this perception likely to inspire you to write another A SPECTER IS HAUNTING TEXAS?

It might.

What was the background for the story "Poor Superman"?

To some extent it was based on Hubbard's Dianetics and Scientology.

Pro or con?

Con.

((Laughter and applause from audience.))

I've always been fascinated by the goddesses of Lankhmar. Were these created out of whole cloth, or was some prior mythology in mind?

I made them an expression of my own feminism, to some degree. I've tried to make them that.

Could you explain the remark, your own feminism?

I've been very sympathetic and in favor of feminism.

What have been your reactions to the graphic novel versions of the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories?

I haven't really passed on it in any great detail. I have been favorably impressed so far.

What did you think of the earlier comic-book adaptations of the Mouser, the ones of about fifteen years ago?

I thought they were only fair, or partially successful.

You haven't mentioned THE WANDERER. Could you tell us about the creation of that?

Yes. I was asked to write a story for a cover illustration of *Fantastic Stories*, and the cover illustration showed a moon exploding. I eventually worked out a story in a couple of weeks, that had some interstellar psychopaths setting off explosions on the Moon. But at the same time I had the vision of writing a story in which the Moon would be crushed to rubble by tidal forces and become a source of meteorites and comets which would injure the Earth. I wrote the story on the basis of the Wanderer being a planet of equal gravity to the Earth, and between them the Earth and the Wanderer would destroy the Moon. That was the novel that I ultimately got out of this assignment from *Fantastic Stories*.

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are a projection of myself and my friend Harry Fischer, who invented them in the first place.

What do you regard as your own relationship to Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser?

They are a projection of myself and my friend Harry Fischer, who invented them in the first place. So it's a very direct participation on my part. Fafhrd is a projection of myself and the Mouser of Harry Fischer. It's very personal. I am Fafhrd, for better or for worse.

Do you wish you'd lived a life more like Fafhrd?

Who doesn't?

((Laughter and applause.))

Could you give us some background on the essay "Monsters and Monster Lovers"?

Yes. I wrote that essay to try to explain to myself my feelings about monsters and the people who are drawn to them. I wrote the essay and then in 1964 I had to deliver an address at a West Coast convention, and I decided to use it as my address at the convention. The idea of monsters — science fiction fans being monster lovers — gave me a way of introducing the subject in a popular address. Then as soon as I'd given the address, why Cele Goldsmith, the editor of *Fantastic Stories*, bought it from me after hearing it and ran it as a non-fiction piece.

What do you think of the proliferation of trilogies in fantasy today?

It just presents a very different problem for the writer. We're told that the fantasy novel is the hardest thing in the world to sell, and then suddenly many writers are required to write them. We've had to go along with it and try to fulfill the publishers' desires.

What is the difference between someone who writes and someone who is a successful writer?

I don't see it. Someone who writes and someone who is a successful writer. You're asking what is the secret of success, what is the thing that qualifies a novel. I don't know any better than you do. What is the secret of the human heart?

I think we can wrap this up. Thank you all for coming. Fritz, thank you for being with us.

((Applause.))

— November 18, 1990, PhilCon ❧

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

H * A * R * I * M * A * U

by Shymala Dason

Savithri wiped her hands on her sari skirts and picked up her knife. She glanced nervously around her. The estate was quiet. Neat rows of tall, leafy rubber trees ran in every direction, and in the dimness below them, there was no movement. No smell of tigers.

She forced herself to concentrate as she stripped away the dried rubber from the cut on the tree, letting the sap run free. She had made the cut too deep. That was the third time today. At least this was the last tree in her section.

She picked up her buckets and walked rapidly, gratefully, toward the road. Another day safely over. For the past two weeks she had been hearing rumors of a man-eating tiger who was moving, by the pattern of his kills, closer and closer toward the Kula Serai area. Perhaps he would pass them by. She walked even faster.

She stepped out of the trees onto the road. The truck was waiting to drive them back to the compound. The other rubber tappers stood beside it, waiting for the Mandor to measure the liquid in their collecting cans. Just as usual, and yet she felt some difference.

They were talking in low, rapid whispers, their faces both excited and grave. She shook her head to clear it. She was imagining things. She moved toward them.

They fell silent. They looked at her, then at one another.

Savithri nodded to them, spoke through a throat suddenly dry. "Is something happening?"

The group stirred, and Mangala shouldered her way toward Savithri, her face gleaming with excitement. Savithri felt her stomach contract. Mangala had looked like this when she broke the news that Savithri's husband had gone away. Savithri stiffened.

Mangala's hands were waving excitedly, the garish glass bangles on her wrists jingling. Her voice was thin and shrill. "Poor Savithri, I'm so sorry, the tiger attacked your son."

Savithri felt Mangala looking at her expectantly, waiting for a reaction, wanting her to scream or cry or tear her hair, but she stood still and did nothing. Finally Mangala repeated spitefully, "It's true, the Mandor saw it – Raju was practically half-eaten. The big man came with his gun, otherwise the boy would have been killed there and then."

That pierced her. Still she would not cry. She felt herself swaying. Mangala's arms reached out to hold her, and Savithri shuddered and tried to pull away but her body would not answer her. There was a

burst of light, and she saw Mangala's face looming, inches from hers, heard Mangala's voice, "Poor thing, it's been too much for her."

Downwind of the truck, Harimau the tiger stood within the shelter of the trees. His liquid, amber eyes were unblinking, the round, predator's pupils reduced to an intense, black dot by the afternoon light. Harimau's white whiskers twitched. He should have been sleeping, for he was heavy with food, but something cried within his head and held him here. Something that reached toward the woman. He watched, intent, till she fell. The wind brought him many scents: he knew hers, and inhaled it.

Savithri's faint did not last long. She was at the hospital within the hour. She listened while they explained her son's condition. First the elderly staff nurse talked to her, and then the young doctor. Their voices slipped through her hands, and she could not grasp what they said.

At Raju's bedside she stood quietly, her hands tightly clenched on the rail. Then she spoke for the first time. "Doctor, sir, do whatever you have to do. Give me my son back. I don't have much money, but I'll raise what I can...."

"I'm sorry," the doctor repeated stiffly. "There's nothing more we can do now. You have to just say your prayers."

"Prayers," she whispered softly. "Prayers." She closed her eyes. Slow tears trickled down her cheeks. She felt the doctor's silent presence, sensed when he quietly left. She bent her head, sobbed silently. Her heavy braid slipped forward, over her hands, slipped onto the bed to touch the body of her son.

The next day she waited. At Raju's bedside when they would let her, and when they would not, in the small, square waiting room of the estate hospital. Waited for news. People streamed in and out. Mangala, bearing a large, steaming tiffin carrier, was the first, and she was not easy to dislodge. There were many others. Savithri listened politely to everyone but said little. She ate the rice and sambar that they put in front of her, though she hated accepting even that much from Mangala; it had no taste.

Late in the evening, when she came home to bathe and change, her grandfather came. Savithri gave him his dinner, glad to have something to do, and listened as he talked of his six-hour bus ride from Kuala Indah, his stop at the hospital. The small house did not seem quite so empty with him there. After dinner they sat on the doorstep, chewing betel leaf.

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

Her grandfather spat, a long, thin stream of red betel juice. "You people are fools," he said. "Just because someone has been to university you think he knows a lot."

Savithri sighed, and explained patiently, "They have done everything they can. They even did two operations, and he is not getting better. Even the great doctor from Kuala Indah can't do any more. We just have to trust God."

"I saw how the boy looked. God knows His business. You are not doing your part."

"What do you mean?"

"Go to the bomoh. He's very strong. The Harimau stole Raju's spirit. The bomoh can give you a charm to get it back." As Savithri looked at him doubtfully, the old man repeated, "You didn't fight to keep your husband; are you just going to sit still and let your son go, too?"

She went to the bomoh the next morning.

The bomoh sat cross-legged on the floor, his sarong tucked up around his knees. He waved Savithri down opposite him. He cast a handful of frankincense onto the glowing coals in the small clay brazier between them. As the cloud of smoke billowed up, he rubbed his hands over the lock of hair Savithri had brought him. Raju's hair.

The bomoh began to sway from side to side, his eyes closed. He spoke in a singsong voice, long pauses between phrases.

"I see your son. I see his spirit attacked by the tiger. I see he has only a small piece of his spirit left in his body."

Savithri flinched.

"Harimau has eaten the rest. Harimau is trying to eat it all." The bomoh came out of his trance and sat, waiting.

Savithri laid the ten ringgit bill in front of him. "Can you get his spirit back from the tiger?" she asked.

"It is not an easy charm," he replied, "but I feel pity for the pain of a mother, so I will do it for you." He picked up a piece of paper and wrote on it with a bit of charcoal. Then he carefully wrapped Raju's hair in the paper, folding it over and tucking it. He handed it to her.

"You have to get a young goat and take it to the river, near where the tiger has been seen. Bury the charm in the ground, then tie the goat to that spot. When the

tiger comes to kill the goat he will step on the charm and your son's spirit will be freed."

Savithri took the packet silently, and stared at it. She wanted her son to be better, but the thought of going into the jungle was terrifying. Tears came into her eyes.

The bomoh stood up. "Your son will die if you do not hurry. You must block the fear from your heart and believe in the charm, or it will not work. Go."

She tightened her lips and nodded, then left his house, tucking the folded paper into her sari blouse.

Savithri knew she was not a very clever woman, nor a brave one. Now, she dared not stop to think, because she knew that if she did, she would not be able to go through with what she had to do.

Where could she get a goat? That would cost two hundred ringgit, half a month's salary. She sighed, and her hand rose to touch the pendant hanging by a black cord about her neck, her tali, the symbol of her wedlock – the only thing, besides Raju, that her husband had ever given her. She clutched it so tightly that the edges cut into her hand.

At noon she stood outside what she thought was the pawn shop, in the middle of Kuala Serai. She hesitated, looking at the sign, wishing she could read it. There were Chinese characters on the sign, and regular letters – English or Malay, she couldn't tell. She could recognize her own name when it was written, in either Tamil or English, and she could print it, but that was all.

Finally, the proprietor came to the front of the shop and barked, "Are you coming in or what? You're blocking my business."

"I have something to pawn." She walked up to him, her hands kneading her sari skirts. His glance flicked over her, from cheap sari to plastic bangles. She could imagine herself in his eyes, feel every drop of sweat on her face.

"What do you have?" His voice was brusque, but he stood aside and let her enter the shop.

"My tali." She pulled the cord over her head and put it on the counter. Without its familiar weight she felt naked.

The proprietor picked it up and examined it, turning it from side to side; sunlight pouring through the open door caught highlights off the curved sign of her husband's caste carved onto the tali.

"No one will buy this secondhand."

"My son is very sick. I need three hundred ringgit."

He shook his head. "I don't want this. If I cannot sell, I don't buy."

"I only want to pawn it," she said. "I'm going to redeem it."

He glanced at her, and she burned with embarrassment. She could save the money to redeem it. He had no right to look down on her.

He reached for the scales. Then, before she could stop him, he had tugged open the knot in the cord and slid the tali off.

"No. . . ." That knot was tied on her wedding day. Only death should have untied it.

He placed the tali on the scale. "I can give you only the gold price. Two hundred twenty ringgit."

She nodded. She picked up the cord, balled it up tightly in her fist.

He put away the tali and handed her the money. Tucking the roll of notes into her blouse, she walked back to the bus stop.

It was evening by the time she was ready.

She stole away from the village, leading the goat, her heart pounding quickly and so loudly that it drummed in her ears. She walked as fast as she could through the rows of rubber trees, then into the jungle.

She blinked. Thick leaves overhead blocked the fading light. She moved on, toward the river, stumbling a little as her eye adjusted to the gloom. The goat bleated in complaint. Mosses growing on the jungle floor felt cool and damp beneath her feet, squished up around the edges of her chappals and between her toes. A faint, sour smell rose from the mosses when they were crushed.

She began to make out colors again, deep purples, blues and vibrant reds, and sweet heavy fragrances so rich she could almost see them too: wild orchids.

She walked on; straggling vines caught her ankles, stones and dead branches tripped her. The goat bleated again. She slapped at her exposed arms and feet, her face and neck. Mosquitoes. Mighty God, she prayed silently, if You can hear me, don't let there be leeches.

The "breek-breek" of the crickets pounded on her ears, and her heart began to beat faster, in time to their cry. Birds flew somewhere high above her, and she shivered as the echoes of their screams fell through the trees toward her. These were not the little mynah birds and sparrows that she knew. These were jungle birds. Unknown.

She neared the river. Ahead of her, the chorus of frogs began. Soon the night hunters would be out.

One hunter already walked in the jungle.

Harimau followed the woman, carefully staying downwind of his prey. He was confused. He could not understand why he was so strangely drawn to the woman. He had hunted successfully the previous night, and was still comfortable. The strange feeling made him angry. He followed her.

Finally, Savithri reached the river bank. Picking up a sharp stone she scooped a small hole in the damp clay beneath a tree and buried the paper. Then she tethered the goat close to the tree, so it stood directly over the buried charm.

The wind shifted. The goat started to cry out, loud and quivering, almost human in its fear.

Savithri looked up.

She froze.

Her vision was filled by the great cat. Harimau was huge. He stood before her, and she saw his jaws quivering with his breath, his whiskers twitching. She screamed, a long, thin scream, then turned and ran.

The goat was bleating madly now, tugging at its rope. Harimau sprang, knocked over the goat. He raked the struggling animal with his claws. The smell of fresh blood rose dizzying in his nostrils. He bent to feed, then paused, shook his head in puzzlement. He abandoned the dying goat, and leapt after the woman.

Moonbeams filtered through the jungle canopy. Harimau stood bathed in their light. Something lay still at his feet. He lifted his head and licked his bloody muzzle. A deep, contented rumbling came from his throat.

He slept. He dreamed.

Savithri woke. She found herself in a cave, dimly lit by a reddish glow, flickering in the firelight. She looked around, puzzled, not recognizing where she was. She strained to remember, and then it came back to her. The jungle, and the dark, and the fear, and Harimau. . . . She shivered. Perhaps this was the afterlife.

A flicker of motion caught her eye. Someone – something – was circling, watching her. She drew herself up, felt her heart pounding. Then there was a voice.

"Amah?"

She was silent, stunned.

The voice came again, hesitant, young. "Amah? Have you come to take me home?"

It was impossible. She was dead, and this was her punishment. Yet it sounded so like. . . "Raju!" she screamed, and there was a sound of rushing feet, and Raju was in her arms, crying, as if he were a small child again.

"Amah, I'm sorry I disobeyed you and went into the jungle. I wanted to see the Harimau. I'm sorry, Amah, please take me home!"

She held him close, automatically soothing him, as she tried to understand what was happening. She remembered the tiger's attack; she remembered her son's still body in the hospital. As the boy's sobs quieted she shook him gently.

"Raju! Amah will take you home, but you have to be a brave boy and help me, all right?" He nodded, sniffling, and she continued, "I want you to tell me everything that happened to you, everything you can remember." It took time, but between his sobs she extracted the story.

Harimau heard voices. They disturbed his rest. His ears twitched, trying to shake away the voices. They did not stop. It woke him. He surged to his feet, roared angrily. The voices in his head did not stop.

The red-lit cavern shook, and the roar of the tiger echoed through it. Raju screamed and flung himself against his mother. She held him, and pulled the throw of her sari over her head and his, trying to block out the dreadful sound and the leaping flame. Then suddenly she understood. They were inside the tiger!

Man-eaters were not ordinary beasts, everyone knew. This must be a spirit tiger. Not content with killing bodies, it also imprisoned souls. Savithri shivered. Death she could face, but not to be able to go to her ancestors, to spend all eternity locked inside the tiger... Her anger rose at the unfairness of it all. And Raju was so young! If only she could find a way out. If only she were cleverer. . .

"'Ma?" Raju tugged at her hand. "'Ma, please, I want to go home. I'm hungry."

Tears came into her eyes. Her son was here; he looked at her trustingly, waiting for her to take him home, for her to feed him. She kissed him tenderly. "Soon, my son, my eye. Very soon. Amah has to think of a way first."

The old stories – there were many stories about Harimau – maybe she could remember something. Long moments passed before she sighed and sat up.

"Raju, stay close to me, and don't be frightened if I seem strange." She saw the question in his eyes and said firmly, "Just do as I say."

She made a circuit of the cave, studying the tiger, thinking about all the injustices and sufferings in her life, of which this was the last. She fed her anger. She began imagining that she was a spirit also, a spirit of vengeance as elemental as Harimau. She grew taller, darker, and there was fire in her eyes. Her son whimpered, began to draw away, but she pulled him to her side sharply. She fed anger to her thoughts, turned it all against the tiger, threw her hatred at the animal who would destroy the little that she had.

Harimau paced from side to side restlessly. He rubbed his head against a rock till the blood came, but no matter what he did the voice did not stop.

Soft, reasonable, merciless, tireless, she continued. "You stole my son's spirit, Harimau, and I am going to make you give it back. You thought you could steal my spirit, too, Harimau, but I am stronger than you. I will kill you, Harimau, as you killed my body, and I will take your body to clothe my spirit. You were wrong to steal me, Harimau. . . ."

Harimau fought. He was strong, but he had just eaten, and he was sluggish. He cried out, and the jungle stilled in horror at the sound, because it was a scream of pain; and none of the jungle denizens had ever imagined any being who could cause such fear and pain in Harimau.

Savithri walked around the cavern. She was larger now, and the color of blood. She carried the child, for he had fainted.

Just as well, for this was not for a child's sight. She grasped great handfuls of the flame, lifted this to her mouth, and swallowed it, laughing. "I eat your substance, Harimau. You will die, Harimau."

Harimau felt madness walk within his head. He saw the great, striding figure, where he was used to seeing only the spent shadows of men. He tore through the jungle, and all gave him wide berth. Blood poured down his head, and there was foam on his lips. He ran straight into the river, past the stiffening body of the goat.

The water closed over his head, and he fought to get above the surface, but the hated voice was there, dragging him down. Harimau fought, and the water burned in his lungs, the voice wailed in his head.

The river was still for a time. Then the surface rippled, and the woman rose above it and pulled herself onto the bank. She was dripping wet, and her sari clung to her, but she was oddly surefooted as she made her way back to her house.

She passed the spot where the tiger had attacked her. There was nothing there; no body, no blood, only some crushed grasses.

The next day, Savithri sat on her doorstep, pounding cumin seed in a granite mortar and pestle. They came to tell her Raju was recovering. She smiled quietly and thanked them.

❧

Shymala Dason is of Indian extraction, and she was born and raised in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She was recently able to travel in Malaysia for an extended stay and hopes to write more stories based on materials collected there. She has a degree in physics and a master's degree in applied mathematics. She now works at NASA, writing software for the Mars Observer. She is trying to sell her first novel and is working on several others. She comments about "Harimau": "I am a student of yoga and believe that anyone who willingly embraces the price will grow into a tiger."

Vincent Di Fate attended the Phoenix (now the Pratt-Manhattan Center) for his formal art training, worked as a photo-engraver, taught elementary school art, and worked in animated films before turning to freelance work in 1969. He won the Hugo for Best Professional artist in 1979, one of the several awards he has received. He has had a number of one-man shows at museums and galleries in North America, Europe, and Japan. In addition to his art activities, Di Fate has lectured extensively about the methods and history of his craft and has been a consultant for MCA, 20th Century Fox, and MGM/United Artists.

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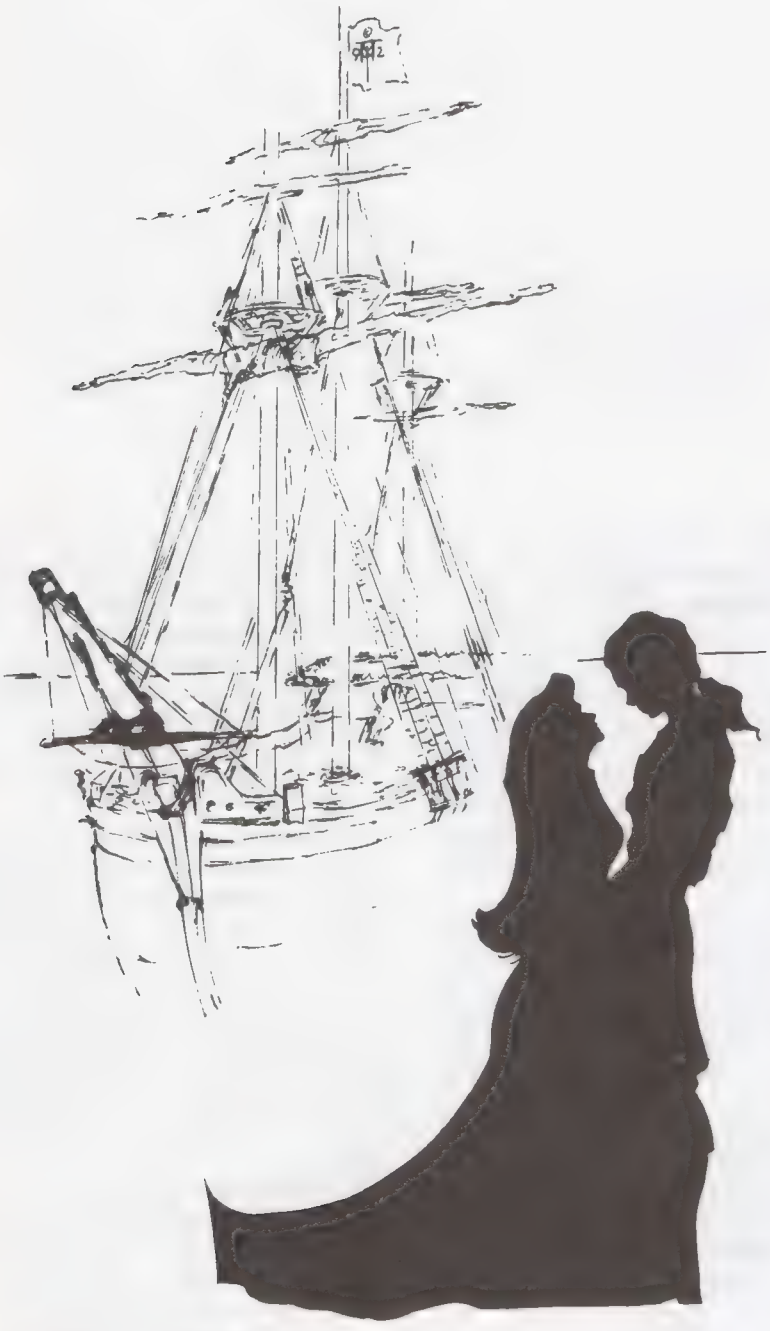

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Wanted, One Virgin

by Thomas D. Sadler

Thin tendrils of smoke circled in the air above a small forge in one corner of the sunlit workshop. Along one wall stood a tall set of shelves filled with books and curious instruments. Directly across from the bookshelves was the door to the workshop; cabinets filled with jars and bottles stood on either side. A pair of workbenches stood side by side along the last wall with two figures bent over them, each intent on something in front of them. One of the people muttered to himself.

"Fenthorn, baneroot, caulwort... Hmm ... So far the ingredients should present no problem. They're all re – Wait. Oh damn!"

"What? What's the matter?" Leesa Darmin looked up from the compounds she was labelling. Leesa was tall, strikingly good-looking with long, chestnut hair framing a square face with a wide forehead, a pair of sultry hazel eyes, long eyelashes, and full lips often parted in an alluring smile. Behind it all, she had one of the finest minds in Calthoria. "Oh nothing. The spell calls for eight drops of a virgin's tears." Andrik Turrin curled his lip. He was slightly shorter than Leesa, average in build, with thick black hair, a clean-shaven face, with a mouth that frequently turned down at the corners. His dark blue eyes flashed. "Virgin's tears! Where in the Seven Hells am I going to find virgin's tears?"

"I'm sure I have no idea, Andrik. There must be a virgin or two somewhere in the city."

"Possibly." The magician looked thoughtful and his rugged face became almost handsome.

"All you have to do is advertise for one. Surely – Ouch! Why did you do that?" Leesa stooped and rubbed her right foot where Andrik had tromped on it. She started to blot at a tear that formed in the corner of her eye. "I thought maybe I could save myself a little work." Andrik said. "Hey! Don't do that." He snatched up a small jar and tried to catch Leesa's teardrops.

"Just what makes you think I'm a virgin?" Leesa demanded. "Just because I took up magic? That's a load of horse droppings and you know it. Only Black Magic works like that." She shuddered. "And I don't want anything to do with that."

"All right. So maybe you're not a virgin." Andrik set the jar back down. "I don't see how a virgin's tears could be different from anyone else's anyway."

Andrik sighed. "I guess I'll just have to do as you suggested and put an advertisement in the paper. I really want to see how this spell turns out."

The next day, in the lower right hand corner of the *Glastonburg Journal* – a four page broadside – a small ad appeared, set off in a box. "Wanted, one virgin. Between the ages of 15 and 19. Only genuine virgins need apply. See Andrik Turrin at 346 Piedmont Lane, Glastonburg."

"That's quite an ad," Leesa said. "But aren't you afraid people might misinterpret it?"

"What people think of my ad is their problem, not mine. We both know there'll be nothing improper going on."

"We do?" Leesa arched an eyebrow and folded her arms across her chest. She had no doubt of that. Nothing improper had ever gone on with Andrik.

"Of course! I'm no cradle robber, Leesa."

"No. Of course not." Leesa agreed.

"But that's not important right now," Andrik replied, searching among the bottles on one of the shelves. "Do you think the ad will bring results?"

"Results? Oh, you..." Leesa jerked her chin up and abruptly turned her back on him and pretended to examine something on her work table. "It just might," she said over her shoulder several seconds later. "But it will probably take a few days."

"I think you're right. As usual. I'll just have to be patient then," Andrik said, puzzled by Leesa's abrupt change of mood. Women! He'd never understand them. Even women magicians, and Leesa was one of the best he'd ever met.

Silence filled the workshop as each of them concentrated on their own magical researches. Leesa was still angry with Andrik for his seeming indifference to her womanly charms. She knew it wasn't right. After all, she had joined up with him to learn more about magic. It wasn't his fault she had found him attractive and desirable.

Early the next morning, Leesa emerged

from her bedroom just as a knock sounded on the front door. She hurried to answer it, surprised that anyone else would be up and about so early. She opened the door a crack, then swung it wide, and smiled.

"Oh, Andrik! Could you come here, please?" she called over her shoulder.

"I'm coming," Andrik called back as he came out of his room, tying a sash around his waist. "What's the problem? Don't tell me someone has come about the ad already."

"I think so. Would you come in, please?" Leesa said as she stepped back out of the way to admit a tall, blond, muscular young man of around seventeen.

Andrik looked at the young man in speechless surprise.

"You shouldn't stare, Andrik, It isn't polite. What's your name, young man?" Leesa fought to keep from laughing at Andrik's reaction.

"It's Dennis, Ma'am. Dennis Servalle. This is 346 Piedmont Lane, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. Are you here about the ad?"

"No! He can't be." Andrik finally said, his face bright red. "That's ridiculous."

"Oh? Why?" Leesa regarded Andrik coolly. "The ad just said virgin. It didn't specify the virgin had to be female."

"Yes, but – everybody knows that virgins are. . ."

"Women? But virgins don't have to be women or girls, Andrik." Leesa looked the youth up and down. He was a mere child!

"Yes, but whoever heard of a male virgin? I've never come across a man who would admit to it."

"Well here's one who does. And a rather good-looking one at that," Leesa said gently teasing.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Sir. Could you tell me why you want a virgin? Are you looking for a suitor for your daughter? I'd be pleased to meet her."

"Daughter!" Leesa gasped. Now it was Andrik's turn to laugh. She gave him a murderous look which he ignored. "Do I look old enough to have a daughter your age?" she asked icily.

"Well I did think you looked kind of young. But I've never been much good at guessing ladies' ages."

"I can tell you you've guessed this lady's age wrong! You won't do at all. I'm sorry. You'd better leave. Now." Leesa pointed at the door.

"Leave? But I thought . . . "

"Would you like me to turn you into a slug?" Leesa raised her hands, pointed at

Artwork by James Balkovek

the youth, and began muttering strange words.

The youth turned pale and backed away from her. "Oh no! You're a magician. I don't want anything to do with magicians!" He turned and fled out the door.

"Daughter, indeed!" Leesa huffed. "Why I'm not much older than that – that brat."

"Of course you are. And much better-looking, too. I wish you hadn't been so quick to turn him away," Andrik said with an ill-concealed smile. "It might have been interesting to make him cry and gather some of his tears. Just to see if they might work. It's – "

"I don't want to talk about it," Leesa hissed.

"As you wish." Andrik smiled and turned away to fuss with something on his workbench. "Well, I hope the next caller proves to be more suitable all the way around."

"If you ask me, I think it's a ridiculous idea to try to find a virgin around here," Leesa sniffed. "That spell probably isn't all that important anyway. Why don't you just forget about it and go on to something else?"

"I suppose you're right, but I still keep getting the feeling there's something incredibly potent about this particular spell somehow. Besides, it shouldn't be that hard to find a virgin and catch some of her tears."

"And I suppose you're not going to give up until you find a virgin." Leesa let out a long, slow breath. "Well, why don't you just conjure up a virgin?"

"Conj – do you really think it's as simple as that? If it were, there would be virgins all over Calthoria and the rest of the Six Kingdoms. Virgins would be as common as – as leaves on a tree. Conjure a virgin, indeed!"

"Well it was just a thought, Andrik. No need to get so excited."

"It was a good thought even if it was wrong," Andrik admitted. "But just maybe . . . There's something I want to try."

Andrik went straight for his workbench and gathered up half a dozen bottles and jars of various powders. He measured out ingredients and mixed them up in a large stone mortar.

"Leesa, draw me a pentacle, please. About four feet across and don't forget the candles."

"I haven't yet," she said, picking up the colored chalks to scribe the diagram in the middle of the floor. "I don't suppose you would tell me what you're going to do?"

"You'll see soon enough." Andrik took a sheet of parchment, rolled it into a cone open at both ends, pinched the small end shut, and spooned the mixed powders into it. He traced the outer circle of the pentacle with the powders and sprinkled more in the center of the star.

"I have to check something in the Mallik Grimoire. Would you please light all but one of the candles, Leesa?"

Leesa nodded and got the flint and steel from her workbench. Andrik pulled the grimoire off the shelf, opened it, and began leafing through it. Still trying to figure what Andrik was up to, Leesa lit seven of the candles and then waited patiently for the wizard to finish. Andrik muttered something under his breath, then clapped the book shut and laid it on his workbench.

"Now what?" Leesa asked.

"I want you to light the powder in the circle and the last candle while I chant a modified spell from Mallik. I've never tried this variation before so there's no telling what will happen. At least the circle will keep the result from breaking out. Ready?"

"Uh – yes. I think so." Leesa struck a spark to a taper and as Andrik chanted, she touched the fire to the powder and then the last candle. There was a bright green-blue flash, a huge puff of smoke, and a boom that seemed to shake the entire building. She jumped back, dropped the taper, then hurriedly stamped out the small fire.

"You sure go in for some flashy spells, don't you?"

"No. Just ones that work. As I hope this one does. Well, something's happening." Andrik took a step closer to the circle as an indistinct form appeared inside the pentacle.

"What in the world is it supposed to be?" Leesa uneasily eyed the short, squat horned creature with multicolored scales, a wide lipless mouth, and two large glowing ochre eyes.

"That, my dear Leesa, is a virgin locater," Andrik said proudly.

Leesa backed away from the circle toward the front door of their workshop. "I wouldn't want something like that hunting for me. Andrik, are you sure it won't do something nasty instead?"

"Positive. I redesigned a spell from the Mallik. It will just help us find a virgin. Now. Where's my atheme?" Andrik hunted around on his workbench.

"Just a moment before you cut the circle. I still don't trust that thing." As if in response, the demon lumbered to the side of the circle closest to Leesa. It looked straight at her and opened and closed its mouth with a lewd expression on its face. Leesa shuddered and looked slightly ill.

"I know I don't trust that thing, Andrik. Let me arm myself with an extra protective spell and amulet. You can do whatever you want."

"Oh all right. But make it quick. This thing will be here for only about twelve hours at the most."

"It'll take about two minutes." Leesa said as she measured out several liquids into a jar and mixed them up. She picked up a thin chain with a small medallion affixed to it and dipped it into the liquid.

"Why do you think you need a protective charm anyway?" Andrik asked, suddenly suspicious.

"That's my business," Leesa said as she hung the chain around her neck and left the medallion out in the open. "Besides, I've worked with you long enough to know magic can sometimes be unpredictable. You can cut the circle now.

"Thank you very much." Andrik blew out two of the candles and drew the knife across the chalk and the blackened lines. In a blink, the demon appeared outside the circle accompanied by the smell of burnt oil and sulphur.

"What want you of me?" it asked, looking from Andrik to Leesa, then back again.

"I want you to help me – us – find a virgin for a very important spell I want to work."

"A virgin?" the demon asked in surprise. "What makes you think I can do that? It is not an easy task."

"I know that!" Andrik snapped. "I didn't summon you here to argue with. Just find me a virgin and return here."

"Very well. Your spell has bound me to do your bidding and I will do what I can." The demon drew itself to its full height, muttered something, and vanished.

"If I had known it was going to be this much trouble, I'd have forgotten about the whole thing," Andrik muttered.

"You've often told me magic isn't always easy," Leesa reminded him.

"Yes. But this is ridiculous." Andrik snorted and leaned against his workbench. He gazed at Leesa and it began to dawn on him how very good-looking she was. He'd always known and admired her fine intellect; that was one reason he had agreed to take her on as a partner and pupil. That and her ability and skill with magic. But now he realized that she was

also extremely attractive.

Leesa meanwhile busied herself with studying one of the books on herbal lore she had acquired two days earlier. She was aware of Andrik's attention and felt both flattered and uncomfortable. That was the most he'd looked at her since she'd first come to work for him a year earlier.

Could he be wondering if I really am a virgin? she thought. That protective amulet I activated should really be getting to him. She turned a page and stared at it, trying to concentrate. I wonder how long we'll have to wait for the demon to reappear.

At that moment, as if on cue, there was a loud boom and a puff of smoke, and two figures popped into existence.

"By the Seven Hells! Not again," Andrik bellowed.

Leesa broke out in a wide smile. It was Dennis Servalle. Again. Looking more bewildered and confused than before. He stared at the two magicians and moaned.

"What have you done?" Andrik shouted at the demon. "You fool!"

"You wanted a virgin. I brought you a virgin. This was the only one I could find in the entire city."

"I wanted a female virgin! We've already seen this one and sent him away."

"Why didn't you say so? I'll put him back."

"Yes. Send him back. And before you return, find me a female virgin. I don't care how far you have to look. Don't come back until you have found one."

"Hold it right there, magician. You brought me here to find and fetch you a virgin. You didn't specify whether it had to be male or female. I'll take this one back but then my obligation to you is finished. If you need a virgin you'll have to go look for one on your own."

The demon seized Dennis Servalle's arm and vanished in another puff of smoke and a loud boom, leaving Andrik standing there open-mouthed and red-faced. After a few seconds, Andrik turned to Leesa.

"Did you hear what he said to me? He won't go out and get me another virgin. He says his obligation is finished."

"I heard, Andrik. Maybe you should just give up. It isn't worth it. Surely the spell can't be that important."

"I suppose you're right." Andrik rubbed his eyes wearily. "But it just seems to me there must be some good reason for requiring a virgin's tears, and I sure would like to find out what."

"Is it really that important?" Leesa studied him closely. He appeared so vulnerable at that moment that her heart went out to him.

"I don't really know. As far as I can tell, this particular spell hasn't been done in over a hundred years. I just have to know what it does. The need to know is almost driving me crazy."

"I'll make a deal with you, Andrik," Leesa said. He jerked his head up and looked at her. "If I can get what you want, you have to do something for me in return."

"What? I'll do it. Anything you want. Gladly. When – where are we going to look?"

"We aren't. I'm going out alone. You stay here and wait. I don't know how long it will take, but when I return you'll be able to complete your spell."

"I don't know how to thank you."

Artwork by James Balkovek

Andrik impulsively took Leesa by the shoulders, pulled her close to him, and kissed her full on the mouth. After a few seconds, he broke off, blushed, and turned away. "I'll – uh – be waiting right here for you. Good luck, Leesa."

"Thank you." She smiled. If that was a sample of his kisses she wouldn't mind more like those. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Then we'll discuss my part of the bargain."

Leesa turned and headed for the door, the brief kiss lingering pleasantly in her mind.

Andrik turned back around just as the door shut. He was still shaky and weak-kneed from the kiss. Why had he done that, he wondered. A handshake would have been more appropriate. Or even a brotherly hug. But, then, they weren't brother and sister, and he found he was really glad of that.

Andrik forced the thoughts to the back of his mind. If Leesa really was going to return with a virgin, he needed to have everything ready. Humming softly, he began removing bottles and jars from their places on the shelves. He lined everything up carefully and then wiped the floor clean, took out the chalks, and began drawing the pentacle. Once everything was ready, he sat down in a chair and propped his feet up to rest for a short while.

When Andrik awoke, the light coming through the window was a soft red-orange and the shadows were long. He grunted and got up to light some lamps. There was no sign of Leesa, which surprised him. He hadn't expected her to take quite so long. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten since breakfast, so he went to the kitchen to start a fire to prepare something to eat.

He had just finished eating his skimpy meal when Leesa entered. She had a satisfied look on her face. Andrik stood up and came toward her, all smiles himself.

"You really did it! You found a virgin. That's wonderful. Where is she?" He looked toward the door. "She's waiting outside, isn't she?"

"No, Andrik. I didn't bring a virgin back with me."

"What! But you said . . . I thought . . . "

"Don't get excited. Your spell calls for eight drops of a virgin's tears." Leesa held up a small cut crystal vial. "Here are the tears. There should be enough to work your spell several times over. Take them, and good luck."

"Thank you." Andrik accepted the vial with a puzzled frown. "Where . . . Who . . . These aren't yours, are they? After all we've gone through, you wouldn't do something like that to me, would you?"

"They're not my tears, Andrik," Leesa said with a trace of anger and irritation. Though it was possible, she thought.

"Oh." Andrik studied the vial for a few seconds. "You didn't hunt up that Dennis what's-his-name, did you?"

"No! Not that I wasn't tempted to. Those tears are from a young woman who's a genuine virgin."

"That's a relief." Andrik relaxed but held onto the vial tightly. "Who is she? How did you find her? How did you know she was a real virgin?"

"Andrik, you ask too many questions. Please stop. I'm tired and hungry." She looked around the workshop. "Since you seem to be all ready, why don't you try out your spell now?"

"I'm going to. But you don't want to watch?"

"No. I'm going to to get something to eat and rest for a while. Call me when you get results."

"If you insist. But it won't be the same without you here. I – uh – my spells seem to turn out better when you're around."

"If I thought you really meant that I'd be flattered."

"But I do. It's just that I never realized it before. Since you started working with me, my magical skills have improved almost as much as yours."

"You're a good teacher, Andrik, even if you go about it in an odd way."

"So are you, Leesa. These past couple of days, you've taught me there are other things besides magic."

"I'm glad you finally realize that. But I really am hungry and tired. Could we talk about this later?"

"How thoughtless of me. Of course. One more thing before you go – something I never thought to ask you before."

"What might that be?" Leesa wondered what he was going to ask. She felt sure it wouldn't be what she wanted to hear. It wasn't.

"The book I got the spell from wasn't very legible. I was just wondering – do you have any idea what the spell could be?"

"I think so. It's something you probably never would have thought of. It's a love potion, Andrik." Leesa smiled smugly and headed for the kitchen, leaving Andrik to gape after her.

After a few seconds, he followed Leesa into the kitchen. "A love potion? What makes you so sure it's a love potion?"

"With an ingredient like virgin's tears, what else could it be? Besides, I looked at the spell yesterday while you were busy with something else. I figured it out right off. So that's what it has to be."

"And you let me go through all this? You didn't say a word about it to me until now."

"Why should I? You're a smart man, Andrik. You should have been able to figure it out if you'd just looked at it from a different angle than your usual one."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh never mind. Why don't you go work the spell and see for yourself? Though, the way you are, a love potion would be wasted."

"Oh really? We'll see about that." Andrik raised his eyebrows. "A love potion, eh? Maybe I can find someone to use it on."

Andrik smiled and strode from the room. This time it was Leesa's turn to gape in surprise. But then she forced herself to concentrate on her meal. He may be bluffing, she told herself, but she wasn't going to let it bother her. Much.

Leesa finished eating much sooner than she'd originally planned and rushed into the workshop. Andrik was seated in a chair facing the kitchen door. He smiled and stood up when she entered the room. "You're a little earlier than I figured. Oh well. Never mind."

"The spell!" Leesa snapped. "Have you tried the spell?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for you. And you took less time than I expected. You must be really curious."

"Damn you, Andrik. Are you going to work the spell or not?"

"I think not, Leesa."

"What? Why not?"

"I don't think it's necessary. You're usually right about such things. Also, I'm afraid we might end up attracting that Dennis fellow again. But I really don't need something like that since I've come to realize that I've got you and there could be more between us."

"I should have realized you'd – what did you say?" Leesa shook her head and put up a hand. "I heard you. It just took me by surprise. It's about time you realized that."

"I never claimed to be wise when it came to understanding women and love." A knock on the door interrupted Andrik. He looked at Leesa questioningly.

"I'll see who it is," she said. She went to the front door and opened it. And gasped.

"Is this 346 Piedmont Lane?" a female voice asked. "I've come about the advertisement for a virgin."

"So did I," another female voice said.

"Me, too," came a chorus of female voices.

"By the Seven Hells!" Leesa said, holding onto the door. She looked back at Andrik. "We forgot all about your ad. There's a line of young women out there that must stretch halfway across town. What'll we do?"

"Shut the door and lock it!" Andrik barked. "We'll sneak out the back way. We don't need that much success."

❧

Thomas D. Sadler lives in Michigan with his wife and four children, a cat, a paraket, two dogs, and five goldfish. He only recently started writing and trying to sell his own stories, after a lifetime of reading and enjoying fantasy and science fiction. He has written a fantasy novel (as yet unpublished) and edits and publishes his own fanzine "to help keep me busy writing."

James Balkovek is one of *FANTASY Magazine*'s most popular artists. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Membership in ASFA, the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists, the group which gives out the Chesley Awards, is open to anyone. It costs $18.00 a year, payable to ASFA, P.O. Box 151442, Arlington TX 76015-7442, and includes their (beautiful) quarterly newsletter.

Artwork by George Barr

What Happy Ending?

by Lyn McConchie

Most stories seem to end with the hero riding off into the sunset with the heroine across his saddlebow. They live happily ever after and people tell tales about them for a hundred years. My story isn't like that at all. How could it be? For a start, I was standing over the body of the hero.

He was supposed to kill the werewolf, not get bitten by it. However, what happened happened. He became a werewolf in turn. He might still have been a hero if he'd killed himself, or found a priest and had the spell annulled, something – anything but return to our village and kill my mother and little sister because they were the ones stupid enough to trust him.

I wouldn't be riding off with him for another reason. I killed him once I found out what he'd become. That isn't in the tales either. Just because my family was loving and foolish enough, he assumed I would be too. I wasn't – but I'd loved him and it wasn't with any feeling of heroism that I shoved the silver-bladed dagger into his heart.

So there I was. No hero or saddlebow for me. No happy ending with marriage to my hero and a family to tell the story of his heroism to on long winter nights. All I could do was stare down at the body and try to wipe away the silly tears as they trickled down my face. The village was kind, of course. They buried him at the crossroads, and gave Mother and Anna decent graves beside the church. I could have stayed but everything reminded me of him. Him and the last fading look of betrayal as he died. So I took to the road with what small belongings I could carry and a pouch of copper and silver bits from the sale of the rest. The priest blessed me before I went and did his best to offer words of comfort. I listened for politeness' sake and forgot them as soon as I was past the first bend. Somehow I didn't think that I was going to find the joy he foretold.

It isn't that I'm uncomely. But I'm a little too tall, just a trifle over-muscled from all the work in the field, and my father – the Gods rest his soul – taught me before he died to use a dagger and shortsword quite competently. It's little things like that that tend to put the suitors off. Garuth had been fond enough to offer for me. I tried to overlook that my dower was a good-sized field and he was interested in *it* more than *me*. He was young, good looking, decent enough, and if he did think too much of his abilities, it was no more than most of the males in

our village. I had loved him since I was a child and he'd stood up for me once against teasing. If he could overlook my failings, I could pass over his. Until the last. I would love no man so much I could ignore the torn bodies of the only two kin I had left in the world.

I marched on in a haze of weariness and sorrow. I stumbled around a corner to find myself in the middle of the scrambling, confused fight. A length of wood swung at me and I ducked.

"Here! I'm not your enemy."

For some odd reason I wasn't believed. The wood lifted to strike again and I struck first.

"Curses!"

"Behind you!"

I spun and slashed with a hastily drawn sword. The dagger I had used to stun the first fool dropped from my hand as I parried.

"Hold up, man. I have no quarrel with you."

The movement of his sword made it clear the statement was not mutual.

"Stop! I have no desire to fight."

His sword licked out, and in reflex I feinted and struck back. He dropped. A bellow of rage alerted me to yet another attacker. This one was older but no less impetuous and unskilled.

We fenced for a few minutes while I attempted to explain that the death of one who was clearly his kinsman had been no more than self-defense. At last my patience ran out and so did his time. I stepped back to clear the blade and peered at what was left of the figures involved in this nonsense.

"Do you want to fight me too?"

"No."

I relaxed carefully. The remaining fighter appeared to have a very high voice. A boy? I looked as it closed in. No, by the Gods! A woman like me.

"You're a woman."

"You have a talent for the obvious."

I grinned. And she had a sharp tongue. "Why were they attacking you?"

"We differed on the justice of murder."

"Oh? They attempted your life?"

She shook her head. "They tried to kill a dog. I'm fond of dogs and I wasn't fond of them."

I blinked. "I killed two men over some animal?"

"Not some animal. My dog. A pure-bred Mollosian dravenhound."

That was interesting. Firstly that she owned one: they were extremely expensive. Secondly that these inept warriors would consider killing one.

Artwork by George Barr

"Why kill a beast worth so much?" I asked.

"She ran off from the caravan. I've been hunting her for days. When I found her these fools tried to deny she was mine. Then when I told them she had mated to a wolf and that was why I was seeking her, they attempted to kill her. Why would they be so stupid? They just muttered something about accursed beasts and tried to sword her."

I looked at her. That explained the attack. "You come from quite a long way from here?"

"Yes. Is that relevant?"

"Someone who lived around here would know better than to tell them your bitch mated with a wolf."

She looked bewildered. "Her pups will be giants amidst their pack. They will be better hunters, hold to me more faithfully. My people always breed a strain of wolf into a line."

"Quite," I assured her. "But hereabouts we have recently had a plague of werewolves. Your recent adversaries would have considered werewolves with the Mollosian fighting skills as a lethal plague you intended to loose upon their kin."

"Werewolves wouldn't mate with a dog. Even if my Johara would stoop to mate with one of them."

"I know, you know. They didn't seem to have the brains to know," I snapped.

"Well, we owe you a debt anyhow. Four were a few too many for me."

"Why didn't your beast help?" I queried, puzzled. "Where is she anyhow?"

"Back down the road. One of them struck her over the head before she could prevent it. Then when he tried to stick her, I stopped gaping and the fight began. They had her tied when I found them."

"Then let's make sure she is still there."

"Yes. My name's Sheearra, by the way. Friends call me Shar."

We hurried around the bend to where a great beast struggled against bonds. Over her stooped a fifth man striking ineptly downwards at her with a short dagger. Her struggles were causing him to miss, but not for long. I glanced at Shar and her look answered me. I tiptoed silently forward, and, opening my mouth, imitated the growl of the dravenhound. The unfortunate man dropped his dagger with a howl of terror and, before I could speak, displayed an astonishing turn of speed. He vanished down the road in a cloud of dust and disappeared around the bend while I stood with my mouth open. Shar began to giggle. It was contagious and I joined her after a few seconds. She bent, slashed the rope that bound her beast, and the dog rolled over to stand shaking the road dust from her coat.

"A magnificent animal. I can see why you value her." I said quietly.

A sudden wave of sadness came over me. I had not even a dog to travel with me. I was alone as even this wanderer of the roads was not.

Shar patted the dog and pointed at me. "Johara! Friend!"

I twitched as the great beast sniffed me thoughtfully. Then a long tongue swept across my face as she rose on hindlegs to touch me.

"She likes you. She is willing to accept you as a friend."

"Thank the Gods for that!"

Shar stared hard at my sword. "You used that as if you'd had training?"

We tramped on down the road, Johara at our heels, and I told her of Father.

"What about the rest of your kin?"

I sighed and continued the story.

"So you have no kin left?"

"I am alone," I agreed.

"I am a caravan guard. They could use another who knows something of the

sword."

I nodded slowly. It would be a living while I decided what to do next.

Shar looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "Besides, you have to stay with us for a while."

"Oh. Why?"

"Where I come from, one who is saved owes a life to the rescuer."

I stared at her. "I saved no lives. You were holding them off quite well when I arrived."

Shar snorted. "True. I could have escaped at any time. But what about Johara?"

"How is she going to repay me?"

"If you remember, the original bone of contention was her pups."

I gaped and then a slow feeling of warmth spread over me. A Mollosian dravenhound of my own!

"You mean it? You would gift me with one of her pups?"

"I mean it, and it is not my gift but hers." She paused. "Sister."

"How long?" My eyes accepted her naming.

Shar smiled happily. "Why, a long time. First she must bear them. Then your choice must be weaned. Then trained. You might have to travel with us for more than a year." She looked at me.

I looked back and a matching smile spread over my face. I doubted that this was the happy ending foretold by the priest. But for now, it would do. Indeed, it would do very well. I marched to whatever destiny awaited me. With me marched a newfound friend and one unborn who would be another sword at my side. To Hades with fairy tales! I liked this reality!

❧

Artwork by George Barr

Lyn McConchie is a New Zealander who had this often-heard experience: "It comes a time when you read several pieces of trash and look up and say 'I could do better than that!'" A voracious reader with a personal library of over four thousand books, she discovered fandom in 1981. When she is not writing, she runs a small farm where she raises sheep for colored wool (brown, grey, etc. – sorry, no pink or green!).

George Barr made his first professional art sale in 1960. He lives in San Jose, CA, and has been providing illustrations for *FANTASY Magazine* since its first issue. He won the Hugo as Best Fan artist in 1968 and has been nominated in both Fan Artist and Professional Artist categories.

Winners of last issue's

Cauldron

voting

Stories:

- First Place: **"Guardian"** – **Bunnie Bessel**
- Second Place: **"The Promise"** – **Diana M. McCabe**
- Third Place: **"The Tengu's Scroll"** – **Dana Kramer-Rolls**

Artists:

- First Place: **Alan Gutierrez** – **for "The Promise"**
- Second Place: **Gail Butler** – **for "Black Ribbon"**
- Third Place: **Alicia Austin** – **for "The Tengu's Scroll"**

Our congratulations to the winners, and our thanks to all of you who took the time to vote!

Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at

FANTASY Magazine

The Fylgja

by Heather Lynn Sarik

Theda saw them first through the pale green gauze of the herb-seller's tent, a sight that made the packet of dried agrimony flutter from her limp fingers into the powder-fine dust at her feet. Stepping out into the direct sunlight, a feverish hand of blessing laid on her scarfed head, she leaned around the wind-twitched cloth, squinting. She did not move to retrieve her purchase, but stood watching as the pair made their way through the maze of cloth-walled stalls, silhouetted behind curtains of yellow and blue and violet, emerging each time from monochrome dark-on-light into a blaze of pagan color. Their height and fairness were unusual enough in a marketplace teeming with small, wiry, dark bodies, but the sheer audacity of their costumes drew stares from even the most jaded of the merchants and passersby.

Theda tugged at the pale blue sash of her decorous white robes, viewing with some amusement the flittering multicolored ribbons that adorned the woman's flaxen hair, the great zigzags of red, purple and black cloth that composed her male companion's tunic. According to local scripture, the pair of them might be struck down for their vanity by the Thes, a trio of goddesses whose astringent laws specifically forbade everything from cosmetics to jeweled belt buckles to the waxing of mustaches. Denied the adornment of their bodies, their worshippers lavished ridiculous embellishment upon their dwellings, temples and public buildings. Theda had found it wise to abandon her usual dress for the cooler and more austere garb of the natives; these two, however, were not only flouting custom but seeming to enjoy the disturbance their obnoxious dress was generating.

As the two foreigners neared her, she caught the sounds of their voices: the woman's unaccented to her mideastern ears, the man's guttural and sharp. His narrowed eyes darted to and fro, and he muttered unintelligibly under his breath in a constant, scowling flow of words. The woman, her rune-scrawled staff marking her as a presumptuous sourer of milk or a conjurer of some merit, nodded and murmured in reply.

They passed her, and she distinctly heard the man's gruff commentary: ". . . Sheep, sheep, cow, goat, cow, mouse, eel. . . ."

They did not look at her; they seemed not to see her, standing in the green-dark shadows of the tent. Theda scooped up the packet of herbs and walked swiftly after them, catching the fading tail-ends of expressions of astonishment and disgust left in the foreigners' choppy wake.

"Hog, sow, sheep," the man went on as Theda crept behind. "Bah, this town is full of milksops and weaklings. See that man over there, the one with the leather armor?"

"The bodyguard?"

"A hare. He's a stinking, hopping hare." His harsh accent made the disparagement savage. Theda wondered for a fleeting moment if the entire town was composed of animals enchanted into human form.

"I need a lion, a wolf, a-a stinking badger!" the man exclaimed. "How else will we find the grave of –"

The woman laid a warning hand on his arm, turning her head in a swirl of ribbons and gleaming pale hair to stare at Theda.

"What's this?" she demanded. "Why do you follow us?"

Theda stood speechless, clutching at the folds of her robe.

The man turned, too, his hand on the hilt of the leather-scabbarded sword at his side. His eyes, the watery grey color of a morning fog, stared fixedly at something just over Theda's head.

"The silver hind," he gasped, falling to one knee.

Theda took a step back, glancing wide-eyed over her shoulder. There was nothing; a veiled seller of rope sandals met her gaze with wide black eyes.

"My lady..." His hands were raised in supplication as she turned back, startled; his voice held a tremor of something akin to relief.

"Kel," the woman said, her hand on his shoulder, her voice sharp with warning.

"She's the one we need." His voice was flat, emphatic. The woman folded her hands on her staff and sucked at her lower lip.

Theda stared from one to the other, at their green eyes and almost colorless, sunburnt noses and cheeks. The woman held up a hand in a gesture of peace that

Artwork by Rob Alexander

was traditional to the province where Theda had conducted her apprenticeship. The maids there braided their hair with strips of bright cloth, as was the staff-holder's; the man, however, judging by his accent, must have come from some more northerly area.

"We have need of a guide," the woman said carefully.

"I'm not a native," Theda replied, confused; her red-brown hair ought to have made that obvious, despite her clothing. "There are dozens of local folk who will conduct you through town for a few coppers."

"Still, you must be more familiar with the town than we. And –" She hesitated. "My companion has seen something about you which may be important to us."

"I don't understand."

"Will you take your midday meal with us, at least?" She forced her stern, fine-boned face into a smile. "We are strangers here like yourself. We would be ill-mannered if we did not extend the courtesy of an invitation to one who comes from the North, surely from my own province and not so far from Kel's Thursfeld."

The odd, almost desperate appeal in Kel's eyes and the woman's pained smile quelled any desire to flee their unthreatening strangeness. Theda tucked the packet of agrimony into a pocket and nodded slowly, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Good," the woman said as Kel rose, his red and black hose bland with dust. "Where might we find the closest refreshment?"

"The Violet Sands."

"Lead the way, friend." The woman made a genial and sweeping gesture of expectation.

Theda could not help but notice, as she started out across the marketplace, an open and inexplicable admiration on Kel's face that had nothing to do with lascivious interest. She turned quickly away, feeling as if her privacy had somehow been violated.

The Violet Sands was not so much a tavern as a clutter of tables and benches beneath a billowing expanse of delicate many-hued cloths, lashed to pillars of brass and stone and allowed to hover, wind-bourne, over the heads and at all sides of the patrons. Kel and Liris did not seem so alien here, in this dancing tempest of color; the sunlight, slanting through filmy emerald and sapphire, caused even their skins to defy the prohibitions of the Thes.

"I am about to die," Kel said, sipping at a goblet of honey-mead; they did not have the ale he wanted, not here in the South.

"Are you sick?" Theda asked. "As Liris guessed, I am a healer; my trifling skills are at your –"

"He is not sick," Liris said quietly. "He has seen his fylgja."

The statement did not strike Theda with the seriousness she suspected it should have. "What does that mean?"

"In the belief of my people, everyone has two souls," Kel replied. "The first cannot be seen. The second, the fylgja, takes the shape of an animal, an animal whose traits mirror those of its owner." He took a hearty and unrefined swig from the goblet, scowling. "When one can see his second soul, and the second souls of others, it means he will die."

"He saw his fylgja one week ago," Liris added softly. "There is little time left for him."

"We came to the South, like you, to gain new knowledge," Kel went on. "Now that my death is near, I have different aims. There is a grave near this town, a cairn of stones, where an infamous warrior of my people is buried. His name was Olen Storrson. He took to his tomb a stolen jewel which rightfully belongs in the crown of our king. Since I will die anyway, I will try to take back the jewel from the guardians he set to watch over his remains. It will be dangerous; no one has yet succeeded, and not for lack of trying. But it the way I wish to die."

"I know of that place, but I don't see why you need me," Theda said uncomfortably. "I'm no fighter; I can't use a knife or a staff, and it goes against my vows to take part in offensive battle."

"I cannot in conscience leave Liris alone to return the jewel to my country, skilled conjurer though she is."

Liris snorted, and it was clear that it was not his praise of her skills which she found objectionable.

"We have lingered here for three days, looking a worthy companion," Kel went on. "Your fylgja tells me that you are both brave and a powerful healer. The silver hind in the tales of our gods is the creature whose breath can purify the waters and whose touch can raise the dead. I trust in my sight, and I am certain that you share the attributes of your fylgja. I will pay you handsomely to join us, to guide us to the tomb, and to help Liris return the jewel should we succeed."

"Oh," Theda said, taken aback.

"Yours is the only fylgja of worth, here," Kel said disparagingly. "I have seen nothing but rats and rabbits and cattle since I arrived. We have dire need of a courageous and adept healer such as yourself."

"Will you accept?" Liris asked gently.

"I have no employment here, and if you think I am worthy of such a task –"

"Yes, yes," Kel cried, standing. "It is I who am not worthy of you! My eternal thanks, Healer."

He excused himself to see about finding mounts for the journey, stamping from the tavern in a flash of bright-hued eagerness.

"There is more that you should know," Liris said in a low voice. "This is not merely the suicide mission of a dying man. His honor is in question, and the recovery of the jewel will help him restore it."

"What do you mean?" Theda asked, her face still flushed with Kel's compliments to her skills.

"Your fylgja is the silver hind, and apparently denotes your skills in healing; mine is the black swan, and indicates my proficiency in magicks. But Kel –" She sighed, shaking her ribbon-plaited head. "Kel's fylgja is the jackal, the scavenger, the coward. The bear or wolf he would have welcomed, the fox accepted with reservations; but the jackal is too much for him to tolerate."

Theda hummed softly under her breath as she gathered her scattered belongings from the tiny rented room. Packets of dried herbs, precious jars of her own salves and tinctures, a little ceramic pot for the cooking of infusions, silken thread and platinum needles, strips of cloth for bandages; carefully wrapped in the folds of an old quilt, they all went into her pack.

At home, she had accounted herself a healer of somewhat less than average ability. She had come South for the sole purpose of gleaning some new skill or medicinal formula from the local physicians and thus making herself and her knowledge a sought-after commodity. Though she had failed miserably in this quest due to the secretive and often disdainful attitudes of her southern counterparts, it was no small consolation that Kel had sensed some sort of untapped potential within her.

It was just the boost her flagging confidence needed. Early on she had discovered that healing, like wizardry, required

Artwork by Rob Alexander

an inborn knack which she appeared to lack. The best healing went beyond the application of salves or the drinking of potions; she had seen her master restore burned flesh and mend wounds with a touch. Devotion and interest, both of which she possessed in great quantity, had seen her through her apprenticeship but would never be sufficient in themselves to carry her on to mastery. Perhaps now, drawing on her long-dormant capacity for healing, she could rise above mere competence and cure rather than simply comfort.

Her horse was just plain stupid. Theda had decided that a half hour ago, when it became clear that the beast would not be moved from following Liris's gelding at a distance of approximately three inches. Its mouth, like its head, was hard and unyielding to repeated and increasingly furious tugging on the reins. Theda slumped back and tried not to flinch when the enchantress's mount kicked delicately at the nose snuffling at its rump, sending up light sprays of dust.

Kel rode ahead, unspeaking, straight-backed, at peace. By contrast, Liris was increasingly ill at ease, trembling, her plaits fuzzed with loosened hair; when they met this morning, her face had been haggard with sleepless strain. Theda had been surprised, yesterday, at how calmly she seemed to have accepted her companion's imminent death. The mask had fallen; Theda could see that the woman's shoulders were hunched with tension, her head turning sharply, constantly, from the path to Kel to her gelding's bobbing head. She wondered, again, if the two were lovers; Liris's former composure had made her think not, but now...

"How much farther?" Kel called, his head turned back over his shoulder. He wore white, the northern color of death; it would be his burial garb.

"Over the next hill, I think," Theda shouted back.

Liris glanced back; her face was shockingly hollow. "You will have to remain outside the circle until the guardians are crippled; they will attack you otherwise."

Theda nodded; they had been over this last night. A barrier of thirteen animate stones, to be overcome with Kel's swordwork and the enchantress's magicks, and herself to patch the enchantress up. In her pouch rattled a handful of gold and silver coins, part of the accumulated wealth Kel would have Liris share out to his kin in the Thursfeld

after his death. As her own funds had been at the point of running out, the payment was more than welcome, though she wished she were not helping Kel to die. She could not imagine, having been told of the northman's repeated acts of selfless bravery and integrity, how his fylgja could be such a disgraceful creature as the jackal.

"There it is," Kel cried, pointing; as her horse jogged persistently along behind Liris's, Theda could see the man-height mound of rocks, stark against the flatness of the dusty wasteland, and the thirteen standing stones that were positioned around it in a rough oval. By some sorcery or trick of erosion – Theda suspected the former – the stones were man-shaped, with boulder-sized suggestions of heads, and midsections that tapered into proportionate legs and feet.

Kel had drawn his sword and stopped his horse, the blade balanced across his thighs.

"From what I've heard, they don't attack until you cross their circle," he said in low, remote voice as they halted their mounts beside his, his eyes on the cairn. "Then they come to life, with great stone arms, and crowd you onto the mound. Someone said once that they crush you on the rocks, but everyone else claims the grave sucks you down, and Olen's bones tear the limbs from your body."

His serenity in the face of such a horrible death made Theda shudder.

"As I've said, I can hope to distract only half of them at most," Liris said, her face ashen and bleak.

"Even stone can be hewn with this blade," Kel said, unruffled. "You yourself have verified the enchantment laid upon it."

Liris said nothing.

Kel dismounted, holding his sword at the ready as if he already faced the standing stones and their flailing limbs. "It's as blue as autumn skies," he said suddenly, irrelevantly.

"What is?" Theda asked as she dropped to the ground, for Liris's chin was slumped against her chest, her hands white on the reins.

"The jewel of Aurik's Crown," he replied. "There's said to be magicks in it, and the one who wears it can speak to the alfar-men without fear of being beguiled into their hills."

"Let's go," Liris said in a strange, empty voice. "Let's get this done and over with."

Theda stared at her, shocked that she would want to hasten Kel's death; but Kel only nodded, seeming untroubled.

Theda unhooked her bulging pack from her horse's saddle, her hands trembling as she slung it over one shoulder; Liris had only her staff and an assortment of small cloth bags.

"You'll have to wait out in the open and hope they don't come after you," Kel told her, nodding towards the cairn. "If you see Liris go down, do what you can. The ring she gave you isn't very powerful, but if something should go wrong, use it."

"But —"

"And don't try to save me, no matter what happens," he said sternly, divining her objection. "Fate has determined what will befall me. You could not prevent it even if you tried."

She nodded reluctantly, rubbing a finger over the unadorned silver circlet on the third finger of her right hand.

After Liris cast a minor charm to keep the horses in the vicinity, the three of them began to plod toward the cairn. The enchantress seemed hardly able to walk, her jaw clenched, her eyes fixed unblinkingly upon the rocky tomb; Theda felt an almost painful upwelling of compassion for her.

"What are those white stones mixed in with the others?" Theda asked Kel in an undertone.

His voice was devoid of emotion. "Bones."

The standing stones were not man-sized; Theda could tell that much from several yards away. They were perhaps twice the height of Kel, and many, many times heavier. If one of them were to fall onto the northman, he would be killed instantly. At the edges of the stones and the mound, spiraling tufts of dust were being kicked up by a breeze that did not exist outside the circle. The silence was complete and unnerving.

"Wait here," Kel said. He did not add any words of farewell, or clasp her hand. Theda was obscurely relieved. Liris nodded to her, once, then hobbled away after Kel with a stiff, dragging gait.

Theda busied herself with laying out her supplies, setting them in an order that would make them easy to find and grab up. Broken bones would likely be the consequence of an encounter with a creature made of stone; she could hardly imagine either of them surviving without some limb ground into a mass of shattered bones and lacerated flesh. She had never tried to heal such a serious wound, and the thought sent a thrill of fear through her.

Kel and Liris were now a few feet outside of the circle. The enchantress pointed at the cairn and said something; Kel nodded, his sword raised and gleaming dully in the overcast morning light. Liris lifted her staff in her hands, nodded jerkily at the northman, and the two of them sprinted into the circle of standing stones.

Theda leapt to her feet, her hands clenched at her sides. The ground trembled; there was a heavy, wet smell to the air, damp and grainy like the scent of earth after a rain. The standing stones began to rock violently to and fro, as if thirteen infant rock-creatures struggled within them.

Liris raised her staff and screamed a series of harsh, strangely accented words, her voice a hoarse cawing, her body wracked with tremors. At once, the ground beneath two of the stones began to give way under their frenzied movement, churning into a frothy, sinking mud. The other eleven, unmired, began to move slowly forward in slow, grotesque undulations of what had appeared to be hard and solid rock.

Kel was by now one-handedly tossing stones as large as his head from the cairn, not pausing to differentiate between rock and the skeletal remains of his predecessors. He did not look back, and Theda shouted a warning as a particularly nimble standing stone neared the edge of the mound. Kel did not appear to have heard her; the grinding must have alerted him, and he whirled with sword held ready to strike. A pendulous extremity loosed itself from the towering stone with a dull grinding, and as it swung ponderously toward him the northman stepped aside and dealt it a slashing blow.

His sword broke. As it struck the stone arm, there was a spectacular burst of glittering light, the upflung metal fragments of the blade catching the bleak sunlight. The splinters rained down on both attacker and defender, and Theda saw bright blood appear on Kel's face and chest as he staggered back onto the cairn. He had dropped the hilt of his weapon; his right arm hung limp, stunned by the force of the impact. And another standing stone was about to join the first.

Breathless, Theda glanced at Liris, who had wallowed two more of the stones in a sorcerous swamp; there was a blinding burst of light, and a fifth lay in small, blackened fragments, unmoving. The enchantress seemed not to see the dilemma of her companion; she drooped over her staff, her lips moving, her trembling hands aimed at another of the lumbering stones.

Kel was moving weakly up the cairn, his progress agonizingly slow but still swift enough to avoid two ungainly swings of stone appendages. He scrambled nearly to the top, ducking under a swing that crashed into the mound and sent dust, splinters, and pebbles up in a blinding spray.

A sixth standing stone went down under Liris's magicks, knocked back flat with an invisible fist of force; Kel had disappeared on the mound, obscured by fine, floating debris. The two standing stones pounded the cairn at random and at irregular intervals, sending up a choking smoke that had Liris wheezing yards away. Two more stones were rounding their fellows at the mound; it seemed Kel would be crushed under the barrage of hammering extremities.

Theda closed her eyes and twisted the silver ring on her finger. There was no abrupt cessation of sound; there was no change in the noise of the battle at all. She opened her eyes, seeing that nothing had changed. Savagely, she turned the gleaming circlet twice, three time around her finger, but to no effect. Cursing, blinking back tears, she tore the useless ring off and threw it away. What had Liris been thinking, giving her such a thing?

Helplessly, she watched as the enchantress staggered towards the cairn, her hand upraised, chanting in a ragged, hardly recognizable voice. All at once, the standing stones ground to a halt; one upraised stone arm stiffened where it had been ready to fall upon the mound. Theda gasped in delight, taking the occurrence to have been the enchantress's work. Then a gust of wind cleared away the dust cloud in a brown-grey puff, and Theda saw that something had risen from the cairn and was drawing Kel down into it.

Liris screamed, rushing forward; the standing stones did not move to stop her. She clambered up onto the mound, sending rocks rattling down in all directions, her black mourning robes catching on jutting rocks. Leaving her equipment behind, Theda ran heedlessly toward the circle.

What was sucking the northman down was not clear. There were flashes of glimmering paleness, what looked like a bony arm locked around Kel's neck; he struggled feebly, but it was clear that he would disappear within moments. Liris struck out at the thing with her staff; its grip loosened, and Kel slid partway out of its grasp, sprawled slackly along the cairn.

Artwork by Rob Alexander

Theda dashed past the frozen stones, wheezing, scaling the mound with the same stumbling ineptitude as the enchantress. Liris gasped out unintelligible sounds, beating at the calcified remains of Olen Storrson with all her strength.

Later, Theda would remember that it was her own cunningly aimed rock that stopped the animated skeleton, shattering its hard, brittle skull into a pile of gleaming, curved shards. Her action gave the creature pause, certainly; but Liris's exhausted, coughing spell was what burst its every bone into a powder, coating Kel, Theda, and herself in a clinging, chalky film.

There were sounds of movement, a jostle of pebbles. Theda opened her eyes, wiping them free of the dust, blinking. Liris had crawled to Kel's side and was leaning over him, no doubt murmuring final endearments. Embarrassed, she turned her head away, then looked back, startled. What had caught her eye was the glint of the dagger that was in the enchantress's left hand.

"A stag," Kel muttered thickly. "I meet my urpr a stag."

"Of course," Liris said quietly, and with an underlying venom that chilled Theda to her bones.

He blinked, tried to move; she saw with a wave of nausea that his left leg had been battered against the rocks of the cairn. "Viper," he muttered. "A viper, Liris, what have you done that your fylgja is –"

"The jewel, love. Where is it?"

He did not reply.

"Can you hear me?" The enchantress's voice held an edge of irritation. "Where is the jewel, Kel?"

"What have you done?"

"You know what I've done," Liris snapped. "You'll die under the hands of that bumbling little fool and I'll have the jewel. Where is it?"

"Inside the cairn," he grated.

She smiled smugly, shifting the dagger to her other hand.

"What are you going to do to him?" Theda demanded, rising.

Liris whirled, seeming to have suddenly remembered her presence. "Go back to whatever insignificant little farming village you came from, you birther of calves, you binder of scraped knees."

Theda flushed angrily. "Kel said my fylgja –"

"Kel saw what I wanted him to see," Liris sneered. "It was a terrible strain, but I kept the enchantments alive. Silver hind indeed, you second-rate herb-witch. Vanity and superstition – oh, I caught you both. And now, all the secrets of the Alfar, mine."

"You –"

"He was no closer to dying yesterday than I," Liris snorted. "I plucked you from the crowd because Kel wouldn't have left town without a third person, not because you heal like some mythical deer."

"I would like to see it," Kel gasped, startling both healer and enchantress. "The jewel, I must see it. . . ."

Liris shrugged indifferently, sheathing her dagger. "If you're still alive when I find it."

Theda could only stare at the woman's matter-of-fact callousness.

"Give him the mercy-blow with a rock if you've a mind to," the enchantress added, stepping over Kel's bloodied form toward the aperture through which the skeleton had risen. "Don't try to stop me, and you can keep your purse and your wretched bags of dried leaves for all I care."

Theda staggered to Kel's side, trying to think of something she could do to help him. Her equipment was scattered over the ground outside the circle, and he might be dead by the time she could return with it.

"Wren," he muttered, gazing at her with unfocused eyes. "Plain, brown, honest wren. Not quite the silver hind, wouldn't you say?"

"You were no more a jackal than I was a silver hind," she said, uncomfortable, perversely disappointed. "I didn't believe it, anyway."

"I know, now," he wheezed. "Perhaps – perhaps it would be kinder if –"

"I can't," Theda said, biting into her lower lip.

He closed his eyes, nodding slightly. His hands were knotted into tight fists, and she was suddenly aware of how much pain he must be in. Feeling utterly helpless and every bit as inept as Liris had suggested, she took hold of his hand, meaning to comfort him.

There was a dislocation; there was a cool, sickening sensation of debilitation. Theda gasped, trying to tug her hand from Kel's, but his fingers were gripping it too tightly. She had been cut once, while gathering tree-bark, her hatchet slipping and slicing into her thigh; looking at her blood flowing down her leg, she had felt exactly this way. Black spots danced in her vision; she saw through hazy eyes Liris's black-draped form disappearing into the cairn.

She finally managed to snatch her hand away, near vomiting, bending down to rest her head on her white-dusted knees.

"Armine and all the gods," Kel gasped.

Theda sluggishly raised her head to glance at him, wondering if his time had come. She was for a moment unable to connect her dizziness with the fact that his leg, though still bleeding trickles through several deep cuts and twisted at an odd angle, was not the crushed, unrecognizable thing it had been before.

She opened her mouth to speak, to protest, to question; surely she could not be responsible for the healing of those injuries. Without a whisper of warning, the cairn shuddered, sending her scrabbling halfway down one side, Kel crying out with the pain of his jarred wounds. A scream arose, shrill and horrified; it took Theda a few seconds to realize that it was neither hers nor Kel's.

"Liris," she called into the rock-dribbling silence, peering up at the top of the mound from her half-crouch.

There was no reply. Kel groaned from above; she scrambled up the now somewhat less steep slope, seeing that the northman had been rolled over twice across the broad surface of the mound. She peered into the mouth of the cairn, seeing nothing but darkness.

"Liris?"

"I think she's dead," Kel muttered.

"Should I go after her?"

"No," he said sharply, painfully, twisting his head around to fix her with a fierce scowl.

"But the jewel, your quest –" She fell silent as Kel held up one fist and opened it to reveal a shallow, azure gem that nearly filled his palm.

"Olen dropped it, trying to draw me down," he said in a slow, bleak voice. "There are wards in any cairn, and I lied so that – so that she would be killed, looking."

Theda stood staring at him, unsure of what to say, or whether she ought to say anything at all.

"I knew – I knew when my sword shattered. I saw the swan flicker, I saw the viper take its place, and it was her –" He shut his eyes, wincing. "I saw my true fylgja. I ought to have died."

"Maybe the jewel. . ."

Kel shook his head. "You healed me. She lied even about your ability."

Theda did not feel prompted to correct him; there was no way he could know that she had never before mended a hurt without salve or potion.

The gem shone dully in his dangling hand as she helped him, limping painfully, down the slope of the mound. The contorted, lifeless standing stones reached in vain toward the nearly leveled cairn; Theda could not conceive of a more fitting grave for the enchantress.

"Will you share in my king's thanks for the recovery of the jewel?" he asked as they reached the pile of strewn equipment and the wary, skittering forms of the horses.

It was a cleverly phrased invitation to travel with him; Theda hid a smile. "I've been paid to help deliver the jewel, after all," she said, indifferently. "And of course, I cannot in good conscience leave you alone to return it, skilled warrior though you are."

He smiled grimly at her wry jest. "The wren is said to be the messenger of the gods, you know."

Theda did not need his consolation, however well-meant; she could be satisfied, now, with what she was. She grabbed up the strap of her half-empty pack as they walked by, leaving her bottles and packets spread out over the gentle slope. The real tools of her trade were no effort to carry; they had been with her all along. ❧

Heather Lynn Sarik is a 19-year-old freshman at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She says, "I love to write and I hope my writing will someday supplement my income as a supermarket cashier or french-fry maker, because I'm afraid that's all I'll be qualified to do after I receive my B.A. in English." She is working on a novel; "The Fylgja" is her first published work.

Rob Alexander is a talented newcomer from Seattle. This is his third set of illustrations for *FANTASY Magazine.*

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Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks To Writers:
What I Reject – And Why

All too often I'll reject a story for this magazine by saying either "Fantasy content is insufficient" or that the story in question impresses me as science fiction. Judging by the letters I get in response to this, all too many of the stories I think of as science fiction have already been rejected by some other editor as having too much of fantasy in them – and the indignant author fires off a letter telling me, often in no uncertain terms, that so-and-so said it was really fantasy, and I am really stupid.

What can I possibly say except it didn't feel all that much like fantasy to me – and like any other umpire, I calls 'em as I sees 'em. After all, the first thing a professional has to learn in this business – I will spare you some edifying stories about how roughly I had to learn it back in the fifties, when there were no markets for fantasy at all, and science fiction fan purists used an even wider definition of fantasy than I did – is that the editor is right, even when he – or she – is wrong. One reason some of my own books – those written in the fifties – are so much like science fiction is that I learned how to make fantasy to read like science fiction – and I don't think it's too much to ask to expect would-be fantasy writers to do the same – in reverse, that is; if you give your science fiction story a feel of fantasy, I might buy it. (That is, if I like it enough.)

What can I possibly say except it didn't feel all that much like fantasy to me — and like any other umpire, I calls 'em like I sees 'em.

But if you start out by telling me in your cover letter that you think of it as science fiction, don't blame me if I do, too. In that case all you're likely to get is a rejection slip where I suggest that you submit it to a strong science fiction market somewhere.

On the other hand, if I'm absolutely crazy about a story, I'll take any excuse I can think of to call it fantasy. The best example of this is the story by Diana Paxson in the short short issue, "The Dancer of Chimaera". Now, this story was about a space station, but I knew Diana well enough to trust her and read it; by the end of the story, so much did it remind me of one of C. L. Moore's Northwest Smith stories that I simply couldn't part with it; and reader votes agreed – it came in well up in the Cauldron line-up. So I may take a chance on another such story – if I go crazy about it; but I wouldn't count on that reaction, if I were you. If you really think it's good enough to keep me reading it, you should at least have sold to me often enough that I'd be willing even to read a science fiction story by you, even if I advised you to send it elsewhere. And if I lose interest on page 2 or 3, remember I warned you.

But it's safer to sneak it by me; by not starting the story off with spaceships or alien planets; because, nineteen times out of twenty – or ninety-nine times out of one hundred – I'll read that and say, "Oh, darn, it's science fiction." If the story doesn't turn me on, I may even say, "Oh, goody, it's science fiction, I don't even have to finish reading it," and reach for a handy rejection slip.

So how can you be absolutely sure I won't reject it as science fiction? In other words, what's unequivocally fantasy?

Dragons? Judging by the number of indifferent dragon stories I get, people who know nothing about fantasy think a dragon story is sure-fire; I get about two dozen or so every week, and at least three-quarters of them are clones of Anne McCaffrey dragons. Now, I love Ms. McCaffrey's dragons, but she treats them more like serious science fiction alien beasts; and when I get an Anne McCaffrey-type dragon, or one treated seriously as science fiction – by virtue of being on an alien planet, perhaps – all you'll get is a rejection, probably as science fiction or because I've already read two dozen dragon stories this week and your story does not stand out in any way from all the rest.

One might say the same thing about elves; if your elves do not differ in any significant way from the elves in Tolkien, or the very good and different elves in Lackey and Norton's ELVENBANE – they also have very different dragons – save me the rejection slip and find one of the Mercedes Lackey fanzines which may like it...or even print it.

I have now printed enough stories about unicorns, sea crea-

tures, dryads, and brute warriors to feel a bit disillusioned about them. I will probably give you a no-fault rejection, telling you I've chosen another story on the same theme and inviting you to submit again.

Another story I'm not eager to get and will probably reject out of hand is the pure ghost story. I will probably also reject stories – unless very well done – about adventuring sorceresses or wizards; so many people send these to me, being familiar only with my Sword and Sorceress volumes, and sure – you wouldn't believe the letters I get, telling me in no uncertain terms that their story would be perfect for the magazine. I usually reject these stories out of hand as "too feminist". I tolerate for the anthologies a little more feminism than in the magazine; after all, the whole point of the Sword and Sorceress anthologies was to present this kind of story without the male sexist bias which made the heroines bad-conduct prizes for the heroes. But not in the magazine, please. I've already been accused of being just another male-bashing feminist. (Yes, really.)

And don't start your story off with a computer; computers are hard technology. And for goodness sake skip the story – I get it even more often than the clone dragon story – about the writer whose computer writes better than he or she does. Judging by the ones I (all too often) get, the story is autobiographical.

Writers Talk Back

Prose and Cons: Rejection Slips

Name Withheld

I feel that you cheated your readers by not publishing (my story). It is a very good story, better than many I've read in your magazine. As for it being based on romance rather than fantasy? Well, I think that "Stand By Me" suffers from the same failing.

You're entitled to your opinion, but sour grapes won't get you very far as a professional writer. I do publish romance, IF I LIKE IT. Submit your story to other markets; if it really is good, someone will buy it eventually. — MZB

Thelma Anderson, Santa Barbara, CA

Thank you for your (rejection) letter of February 1. Your postscript states it is a form letter. It certainly doesn't read like one; your phrasing lets a writer land on a bed of down! ...following your suggestion of resubmitting the piece, I will send it out again. No, I won't send (it) back to you, but when I've had the opportunity to read several issues of your magazine and think I have something you might consider, I'll give you another try. Believe it or not, your letter made my day!

This is the best way to react to rejection — as a learning experience. Not incidentally, this sort of response makes me happy to see your name on the next story you send, and leaves one less bias for me to overcome on the way to a fair evaluation of your work. — MZB

Wendy Simpson, Wilmington, DE

Some years ago I submitted a short story to an installment of SWORD AND SORCERESS. Although it was rejected, my name somehow got on your list of fully paid-up subscribers for *FANTASY Magazine* (I learned this from your previous editor)...At first I chose not to subscribe because I was upset over the rejection. (What new writer isn't?) But the issue impressed me a great deal, so this past October I made the subscription as a sort of birthday present to myself.

The best way to know what I LIKE (as opposed to what the guidelines say I want) is to read the magazine. This doesn't guarantee a sale, but it certainly improves your chances. — MZB

Per your instructions...I am writing this letter to your column. First, thank you for reading my story...Second, the only reason I wrote the "cute, chatty cover letter" was so you wouldn't think I was one of those writers who sends you stories even though they've never read your magazine. With every submission you send me guidelines and a subscription order form. I was simply trying to save you the trouble of doing so, since I am already a subscriber and have several copies of the same guidelines.

Don't take it personally; we automatically send guidelines and subscription forms with rejected stories. Give the extra subscription forms to your friends; leave our guidelines at your favorite bookstore. Or, just recycle the paper.— JAR

TICKY-TACKY TECHIE-TALKIE

Brent Sasley, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

You might not be able to recall my story, but there was one comment you made which I didn't fully grasp. You said my tale used too much language of technology. What IS the right language for fantasy? I have read extensively in fantasy...and I guess my writing style is a combination of all those I've read, plus my own...Are you referring to a certain type of wording? The use of long words? What makes a story fantasy, if not for swords and sorcery, dragons and demons? I was always under the impression that science fiction dealt with starships and distant planets and parsecs and lasers...I would really appreciate a clarification.

First, remember that I read dozens of stories every day, and have been doing so for many years; I've seen a LOT of stories. When I read through a story for the first time, I get a general impression of what it's about, and whether I like it or not. I reject stories for many reasons, including what they're about (i.e. your story gave me the impression of too much technological language). Often, I reject because the story is trite or I simply didn't like the way it was written. Almost always, it is some combination of the two; because if I REALLY like a story, I'll publish it, even if it's got technical language, romance, horror, or whatever. I do not have the time to analyze in detail why I don't like each story I reject, so your rejection slip indicates the result of my overall impression. — MZB

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Priscilla Armstrong, Timonium, MD

I am happy to see you talking about the "lie-lay", "sit-set" confusion. How about a word or two about "for he and I" or "less-fewer" and "good-well". How about that really tricky one, "further-farther" which I see confused in many books, not just in television speech. You might also give a warning to those who depend on their computer spell-check. Computers cannot tell which "to-too-two" is correct; "affect-effect" must also be checked by eye, and there are others...

There is definitely room for further/farther discussion of these matters, so that less/fewer writers will confuse them. Marion and me/Marion and I agree that affective/effective language is important to telling a story good/well, and it's obvious that you do, to/two/too. Their/there/they're will be more discussion in future columns of "MZB Tanks to Writhers". — JAR

The Sea-King's Harp

by Mary K. Frey

t is said the finest songs in all the world are those sung in the sea-king's palace and that from the sea-king's harp come the notes of the most beautiful music ever created. I would have that harp."

Because the woman who made the request was as lovely as the music of which she spoke, the young man who gazed at her with his heart in his eyes decided that if any brought her the sea-king's harp, it would be he. Perhaps then she would let herself be wooed.

Aren travelled west. The road grew narrower with each town he passed until, at last shrunk to scarcely more than two ruts, it ceased to exist at all in the fishing village called Land's End. As bluntly descriptive as that name was, there was still land after a sort to the west: marshy, tidal channels in which the solid land ran like an old man's arthritic fingers splayed out across a counterpane of tall, wind-worn grasses. It must have been possible to wrest a living from the higher ground, since many years ago someone had built a small stone house and an even smaller barn on one of the "fingers". Perhaps it was a fisherman who had traps in among the gray- green grasses which clogged the channels; perhaps it was simply someone who had preferred his own company to that of others. Whoever, he had been gone for more years than the villagers of Land's End could recall, and the isolated stone buildings had stood empty, cold, and bare until Aren came from the light, warmth, and luxury of the royal court.

Although he had put off his wine-red velvets and glittering gems, the villagers were not fooled into taking Aren for one of their own kind, come west in search of fortune or adventure. Yet, they were too polite to ask the handsome youth outright what had brought him to Land's End. He might have been amused if he'd ever chanced to overhear the histories with which he'd been endowed by his new neighbors: he was suffering from unrequited love and a broken heart; he had been exiled for a treasonous sire's deeds; he'd been deprived of his true birthright by an unscrupulous sibling.

Aren settled into the small stone house, his days occupied with the planting of a vegetable garden and watching the tide's ebb and flow. At night, he closed the wooden door and shutters tightly, lit a lamp, and studied the aged volumes he'd brought with him, old writings filled with the ways and means of dealing with the sea-folk. He would lift his head from the yellowed pages and listen to the rattling of the wind and the pounding of the waves, straining to catch the strange melodies woven between them by inhuman voices. The sea-folk were clever, of that there was no doubt. He knew he would have to outwit them if he was going to steal the sea-king's harp and give it to his lady love.

There was an old man who drove a small pony-cart who began to make a habit of coming out the single track through the marshlands, bringing with him whatever he thought the stranger might want to purchase. Aren never asked the fellow's name although in his mind he thought of him as Wyckel since the stooped, balding figure reminded him of a gardener in the palace who was called that. From this western Wyckel, he found himself purchasing firewood, a carefully wrapped packet of tea, a length of blue checked cloth with which to brighten his simple dining table. Unless he made an effort to go into the village, Wyckel was his limit of social contact.

"Ye should be having a dog," the old man declared one early summer day as the two of them worked to unload the cart of Aren's latest acquisitions.

"I don't mind being alone," Aren replied.

"It's not the companionship I was thinking of." Wyckel paused to study the western horizon. "Though it's true ye might be finding it lonely out here when the winter storms come. A dog would keep ye safe from the wiles of the kelpie."

"The kelpie?" Aren asked, even as his heart began to beat faster. He had not spoken of his mission to the old man, but he did know that *kelpie* was one of the words people in this part of the kingdom used for a woman of the sea-folk. Perhaps Wyckel would tell him something that wasn't in the old books. "You mean, one of the sea-maids?"

Artwork by Alan Guiterrez

"Aye. The kelpie, she be scared of the dogs. And ye ought to be on the watch for the kelpie, all alone out here as ye be. Once the kelpie takes a fancy to ye and gets her claws into ye, she will steal yer heart."

Aren chuckled. "I'm not worried about what some sea-creature might try to do with my heart, since I've already pledged it to the most beautiful woman in the world." He did not add that it was his love for that woman which had brought him to Land's End in the first place.

"Ye must not discount the charms of the kelpie should she choose to woo ye. The next time I come here, I be bringing ye a dog," Wyckel insisted.

Artwork by Alan Guiterrez

As it happened, on the very day that Aren and the old man held this conversation, there was a kelpie listening to every word they said. She had ridden the high tide up the channel nearest the little stone house and secreted herself among the tall marsh grasses in order to see with her own eyes the handsome newcomer she and her sisters had overheard talk of among the land-folk who ventured out onto the ocean in their fishing boats. The kelpie's name was Bethshima, and she was every bit as vain as being one of the sea-king's daughters gave her a right to be.

When Bethshima heard the delectable young man with the windblown, dark hair say he'd already given his heart to the most beautiful woman in the world, she clenched her fists and twitched her fishy tail. "How dare he speak so, when he has yet to lay eyes on *me*?" she hissed, and began to construct a plan of her own. It must be done quickly, though, if that dried out old shell of a man was planning to bring her quarry a dog, since it was quite true that her kind feared dogs.

Bethshima's first task was to intrigue her target. The rest of her afternoon was spent observing the man. While she had no doubts about her charms, Bethshima saw no point to wasting time and effort casting out lures which did not speak directly to this one's psyche. She waited patiently while he tended to his vegetable rows, brought his horse into the barn for the night, and repaired a wind-damaged shutter on the ocean-facing side of the house. When the sun had swollen to a great, reddish ball and sunk halfway into the sea, she began to sing.

Bethshima had determined her voice was the best way to seduce this one. As she watched him, she had noticed how alert he was to every tweet and peep that came from the little creatures living in the marshlands although he scarcely noticed their movements. Many land-folk had been drawn into the ocean's depths when they heard one of the sea-king's daughters sing, of course. Bethshima did not create that sort of music on this first day though, since she had every intention of capturing his spirit as well as his body. Before he met his watery end, she would have this man admitting to her that his heart had not been so safe after all.

He heard the music almost immediately, pausing as he gathered his tools from the repair of the shutter and just slightly turning his head in the direction of Bethshima's hiding place among the reeds. She hesitated; her voice almost faltered. This one was remarkably handsome! The thought flashed in her mind that she must not tell her sisters everything about him, lest someone else decide to come see what he looked like and set other traps for him. She knew then that having this one all to herself was the most important thing in the world.

Aren had not spoken to the old man about how he spent his evenings. When the kelpie began to sing – and Aren knew that was exactly what the new sound on the evening breeze had to be – he had his confirmation that the arcane spells from the books he'd studied were still valid. He had spent no small sum on rather costly, exotic ingredients before he left the civilized world for the wilds of Land's End. It was good to know they had accomplished their purpose of piquing the sea-maid's interest in him.

The singing seemed to be coming from the stretch of tidal water just beyond the house. He did not go to look for the singer this time, of course. It was important the sea-woman did not have her curiosity or her desires satisfied too quickly or too easily if he was going to drive her to the compulsion to bring him what he wanted.

Besides, it was enjoyable music. The next morning, Aren heard a slight difference in the waves as they lapped against the sea grass nearest the house which suggested his visitor had returned. Or was still there? His ancient volumes had little to say about the eating and sleeping habits of the sea-folk. He could only surmise the authors had been too busy disagreeing with each other about the true appearance of the sea-folk. According to one, sea-women were vile hags, with sea snakes for hair and eyes whose gaze would stop a man's heart moments before the claws Wyckel had mentioned ripped open his chest so that she could

sink her fangs into it. Another claimed sea-women were far more beautiful than any who'd ever walked on land. Yet a third stated that their looks were as varied as those of human females.

Although he was becoming anxious to see for himself, Aren refused to let his steps take him down to the channel just yet. All the information he possessed told him that was the intent of the sea-woman's song. He would never succeed if he allowed her to think she had caught him so easily. Each night after supper he continued to recite the spells from the old books so that she would not become too frustrated and swim away.

He waited until the fifth sunset to approach her, and even then he carried a fishing pole with him so that he could pretend he'd come to the water's edge for some other reason and that his attention was focused on something else entirely. A large rock was there on which he could sit to cast out his fishing line and admire the shifting hues of the western horizon. The kelpie was clever enough to vary her song, so that he seemed no closer now to where she was hidden, but he knew that if he were to look back over his shoulder, she would be there. If he just happened to let his left hand drop into the water alongside where he sat on the rock, he would be able to touch her.

That night, he dreamed of the sea-maid, a luridly erotic dream from which he awoke with a start, somewhat embarrassed by unmistakable evidence that his body was not immune to the effects of his imaginings even though he was unable to recall whether he'd dreamed of her as beauty or hag. When sleep failed to return, he rose, lit the lamp, rested his elbows on the checkered cloth which covered his simple dining table, and leafed through the old books.

It was a moonless night, and so the thin, telltale border of light around the cottage's wooden door and shutters was impossible to miss. Bethshima smiled to herself, rearranged the artful drape of her fishtail over the edge of the rock upon which the man had sat, and resumed drawing her mother-of-pearl comb through her long, unplaited golden hair. She knew precisely why the man did not sleep, since it was one of her songs which had woven its way into his dreams.

Such a stubborn man! Perhaps in a day or two, she would speak to him when he came down to the water. Maybe in as soon as a week, she would let him see the source of tonight's dream. Bethshima toyed with the end of the lock of hair which had fallen forward to curl over her right breast. That, naturally, would be the end of his resistance to her.

Thinking of that moment was so pleasurable that she forgot all about watching for the sunrise and returning to her hiding place among the reeds. She fell asleep stretched out on the rock, with her fishtail trailing into the water and her hair spread out like a golden fan over the human parts of her body. She did not wake when the first rays of sunlight stretched out across her silvery scales. She did not wake when someone's shadow fell across the rays of sunlight as he stood there, silently, watching her sleep. She did not wake until something cold and wet brushed against her hand with a snuffling noise. Her eyes blinked open and her whole body went rigid with fear.

A dog! A black and white, spotty, floppy-eared dog who was so excited at the idea of having caught himself a creature of some sort, he could scarcely keep his tail from wagging all the rest of him. Even as Bethshima eyed her enemy, she could hear the voices of two human men somewhere in the distance and she remembered what the old one had said several days before. She muttered a curse word, knowing that if the dog became part of her target's household, she might as well abandon her plans. Even a small dog would have sharp teeth and claws. Dogs were always hungry, and they were not very discriminating in their diets. She shivered with dread and rued the curiosity which had brought her here to see the handsome young man.

The dog barked, a sharp sound which hurt her ears. That was bound to bring the men. Bethshima could hear their voices and the sound of their booted feet approaching even though she did not dare raise her head to look in that direction. The slightest movement on her part might be the signal the dog thought he needed to attack.

Someone whistled. The dog turned away from her toward the unexpected sound. His tail wagged with pathetic eagerness.

As quick as the blink of an eye, Bethshima slid off the rock into the water, forcing herself down into the mud of the channel's bottom. There was nothing to do now but try to still the frantic thumping of her heart and hope the water was deep enough to discourage the men and the dog from attempting to find where she had gone.

It had been a near thing with Wyckel's dog. Aren shuddered to think what would have happened if the dog had taken a bite out of the kelpie. As likely as not, he would have lost forever all chance of getting his hands on the sea-king's harp, for she would have made certain that all sea-folk avoided this place from then on. There had been no song from her at sunset this evening, the first time in many days that she had not sung for him. He did not know whether the sea-maid had merely taken refuge from the dog in the deepest part of the tidal channel or if she had fled as far as the open sea.

What if he had to begin the process all over again? He had used up all of some of the rarer substances required for the spells which had drawn her to him in the first place. He had no money left to buy more, assuming they were even to be had. He worried that the woman for whom he was doing all this might take a fancy to someone else if he stayed away from her too long on this errand. Also, the human portion of what he had seen on the rock this morning had been more beautiful than he could have ever imagined. If it weren't for her fishtail –

Aren shook his head to drive out such disloyal thoughts. He'd given his heart to another already. Besides, how in the names of all the gods could a man and a sea-maid express their love for each other, given the total impossibility of any normal culmination of love? He supposed one must discount what the two of them had done in his dream the night before. He sat down on the rock, drew his knees up to wrap his arms around them, bowed his head, and closed his eyes. He envisioned returning to the capital empty-handed and those whom he'd considered his friends laughing at him. What if this whole business was nothing more than a fool's errand with himself in the role of the fool?

"You must not be so sad," a voice whispered below and to the right of his perch on the rock. "I have not gone away yet."

He lifted his head and turned to look at the face staring up at him from the water. It was critical at this moment that he not betray his knowledge of her kind, for fear she suspect how much control he could exert over her. She would only cooperate if she believed *she* held the upper hand. "You...you are real," he exhaled shakily. "You were not merely a dream." The scintillating smile she deigned to bestow

upon him was proof that he had her fooled.

They talked. All that evening, until he began to shiver from the night dampness, and all the next day, they talked. He found it remarkably easy to direct the conversation in the ways he wished it to go because she had no notion he already knew the answers to most of the questions he asked about the world beneath the sea. Hope flourished inside him again that he would succeed in obtaining the sea-king's harp from her before long.

It was not possible for Aren to spend all his time with Bethshima, of course. He had the horse and the vegetable garden to attend to. There were days when old Wyckel came to talk to him, trying to peddle some bit of merchandise. Aren found he was reluctant to say anything at all to the old man about the sea-maid. Each time, he regretfully refused to take the dog and hoped he sounded sincere. Each time the dog visited, Bethshima swam away in terror and it took the better part of the rest of the day to lure her back. Aren wished he dared tell Wyckel not to bring the animal with him at all.

One morning he found himself weaving a daisy chain as he sat on the wooden bench outside his cottage, waiting for the familiar splashing from the tidal channel which indicated Bethshima was ready for their daily chat. He stared at his fingers, wondering what he was doing. According to the schedule he had worked out with the help of the ancient books, it still lacked a week before he was to make her a small, insignificant gift as a "token of his affection", and yet he knew he was fashioning the wreath of white and yellow flowers for her hair.

He found that she was enchantingly amazed and grateful for the circlet of flowers. For just a fleeting moment, he found himself wishing that the woman to whom he'd promised his heart could be so contented with such a simple offering.

It was important to instill a feeling of obligation in the sea-maid, so that eventually honor would compel her to inquire if there was something she might give him in return. At that point, it was essential that his gifts to her have increased in value. When he made his request, it must not seem unreasonable in light of what she had received from him.

There was a sonnet he had been composing in the evenings when darkness and damp drove him indoors. He planned to present it to his ladylove along with the sea-king's harp. He might even have time to set it to music. She would play and he would sing it to her. In the meantime, he would recite the poem for Bethshima, telling her that she was the source of his inspiration. The sea-maid would be flattered, and she would never even guess that it was meant for some other female since it did mention the sea and beautiful music as well as his own deepening passion for the woman to whom it was addressed.

Bethshima was speechless when she heard it, and Aren felt inordinately pleased that she had liked it. Even if it wasn't truly meant for her.

"I think I would like to hear it set to music," she suggested, flicking her tail so that a series of ever widening ripples spread out across the tidal channel. She'd refused to come out of the water to join him on the rock, claiming that such behavior was immodest.

He protested. "I would never *dare* to attempt that for you. Nothing I did would come even close to the beauty of the music I've heard from you. And I remember you telling me just the other day that there are many in your father's palace who claim to be far more musical than you." He strove for a wistful expression.

For the first time, she mentioned the sea-king's harp. Aren folded the paper on which he'd written the sonnet and tucked it inside his shirt. "Perhaps set to music produced by the sea-king's harp, even this poor poem would become a thing of beauty," he agreed. "But since I will never set my fingers to the instrument, I can only hope you will accept my meager gift as it is now."

It was two days before Bethshima said to him, "If you would be willing to dare all, there is a way you could play the sea-king's harp."

Aren chuckled. "If I could breathe water, as your kind does, then you might be right."

"There is a way," she suggested with a coy smile and a toss of her head so that her golden hair floated out on the mild current. He knew she was teasing him with a glimpse of her bare breasts, and he allowed her to think he relished the sight as she meant him to. "If you are a brave man."

He cleared his throat. "Brave or not, I must be leaving here in a day or so. I have friends who are expecting me, and I am not particularly anxious for them to come here looking for me. I don't think they would understand about you and me." Let her interpret that as she wished, so long as it drove her to bring the harp here to him.

The next day he began to clean up about the house and barn as if he really were leaving. The morning after, he saddled his horse, bid the sea-maid a moderately emotional farewell, and rode off toward the village.

An hour later, he returned, re-stabled his mount, and strode down to the water's edge to enact a scene of great heartbreak and melancholy. If his suspicions were correct, Bethshima had not yet fled to the open sea.

"I cannot bear the thought of the rest of my life without you," he declared when she had surfaced. He did not mean what he said, but he knew that it was what she expected to hear. The words were simply ones he had memorized from one of the old books which related the tale of a young man who had been lured into the sea by the seductive ways of a kelpie. "I do not know that I have the courage to do what must be done if I am to join you in your father's watery realm. What I do know is that I do not want to live away from you." Dramatically, he tore off his clothes and leaped into the water alongside her. "Whatever the price to be with you, I will gladly pay it." Aren was not worried what that price might be since his true intention, of course, was not to succumb to her, but to force her to bring him the sea-king's harp.

The sea-maid did not seem the least bit surprised by this performance. If anything, she looked as pleased as a cat with a dish of cream.

ethshima was distressed at the sight of Aren struggling to keep his head above water. Humans were *so* ungainly when they tried to swim, despite how magnificent they appeared when they used their legs to stride across dry land. Her own refusal to join him on the rock when they talked stemmed not from a sense of modesty, as she claimed, but from her reluctance to appear as awkward as he did to her now.

"It is not as simple as you make it sound," she told him. "You cannot breathe water just because you think it would be a handy thing to do. You must undergo a sea-change, and for that, I must bring you a special potion brewed by my father's sister, the sea-witch. If you promise to wait for my return, I will let you get out of the water for now."

There was no harm in leading him to think he'd lost any ability to act of his own volition. Besides, although he had said a bunch of nonsense about not wanting to live without her, there had been nothing from him about surrendering his heart to her, and that was what she had to hear before he was no longer able to say anything at all.

"How long will you be gone?" he asked, moving his arms and legs as if he were a frog. "I wasn't gone from here an hour before I missed you so much, I thought my heart would break if I did not return. Please hurry, so that we can be together forever as soon as possible."

That was some improvement, Bethshima decided. At least he'd mentioned his heart. "I will bring what you want by the next sunrise," she assured him. If only he weren't thrashing about like a netted fish, making her afraid that he might inadvertently hurt her, she would have put her arms around him and kissed him before she left.

She went then, before she had to endure watching him climb back onto the shore, and swam out into the open sea. There was no time to dally if she was to reach her father's palace and speak to her aunt before dark. It occurred to her that as a reward for Aren's prompt submission, she could take the sea-king's harp to him as well and let him play it just once. She smiled at the thought of how much he would enjoy that.

The sea-witch was not surprised when Bethshima arrived with a tale of a handsome male two-legs and a request for one of her special brews. She grinned, showing her jagged fangs, and sent for Bethshima's sisters, since all would enjoy hearing the intimate details of the human's seduction. She wasted no time in breaking off the heads from two of the numerous sea snakes which comprised her hair to toss into her cauldron, and she stirred the bubbling mixture with the talon on her long, crooked index finger. In a few minutes, Bethshima's sisters were gathering around her to hear about the brazen egotism of the human she'd seduced.

Artwork by Alan Guiterrez

Bethshima did not understand why she felt compelled to embroider the truth of her encounters with Aren so that what her sisters and her aunt heard was not precisely what had really happened. She did not even reveal his whereabouts to them, telling herself that this was merely a wise precaution to keep those who might covet him away until she'd finished with him. She did mention the sonnet he had written for her, although she adamantly refused to repeat any of its phrases for as unappreciative an audience as her sisters. Their persistent questions, demanding to hear over and over again what all of him looked like, annoyed her.

"Leave me be!" she exclaimed at last, trying to blink away the tears of her anger before anyone noticed. "I have already told you, and that's all there is to say."

The sea-witch rose up to her full height and stretched out one green, glistening arm. "Go away now all of you except Bethshima!" And when they had gone, since one did not disobey the sea-king's sister, except at peril of one's life, the sea-witch siphoned some of her brew into a puffer fish's bladder and held it out to her niece. "Take it, for as much good as it will do you. You haven't the courage to give it to him, you know, for you have fallen in love with your prey."

Bethshima denied the accusation, although she could not look directly at any of her aunt's seven eyes as she spoke the words and there was a growing, empty place in the pit of her stomach. The thought of Aren lying pale and still on one of the coral catafalques in the sea-king's throne room had become quite unbearable.

"It is nothing of which you should be ashamed," the sea-witch said more gently. "When such things happen, nine times out of ten it is because the human is using some magician's spells to enthrall you."

Bethshima told herself that Aren would never do such a thing. If she had fallen in love with him, it was because he was good and brave and handsome. And because he loved her as much as she had come to love him.

"I think, from what you have told me, what this human wants is the sea-king's harp," her aunt went on. "He shall have it, but before you take it to him, let me dip it in my brew." She laughed, a bone-chilling cascade of notes that echoed across the floor of two or three seas. "Fetch me your father's harp now. This man you fancy shall have it, but unless his love for you is genuine, he shall wish that he had never wanted to put his fingers to its strings at all."

"What...what will happen to him?" Bethshima dared to ask when she had returned with it. "I would sooner die than harm him."

"That," the sea-witch announced as she dipped the gem-studded curve of whalebone into her steaming cauldron, "can be arranged. Now go, before I decide not to be so generous to you, child. If the human who plays the sea-king's harp truly loves you, all will be well. If not –" She shrugged and waved her niece away

with a gesture of dismissal. "You may regret your vow to die rather than bring him any harm."

Bethshima put her arms around the harp and, with the fish bladder of poison clutched in the fingers of one hand, swam back toward the tidal channel where she had left Aren. Out the corner of one eye, she saw that some of her sisters were following at a distance. She would have taken the time to shoo them away, but she had promised Aren to return by the next sunrise, and there was no time to spare if she was to keep her word.

As for the sea-witch's dire warning, Bethshima was not in the least bit worried, for as soon as she saw the two-legged figure standing on the shore watching for her and could make out his handsome profile and his dark hair just slightly ruffled by the morning breeze, she knew that he could never have deceived her about his feelings.

"Aren! Look what I have brought you!" she cried out and held the harp up to him. "Now you can turn your poem into a song as beautiful as you want it to be."

He had the harp in his own hands! Aren could scarcely believe how easy it had been. He ran his fingers over the frame, wondering that the thing was not more beautiful. What had looked like costly gems when the sea-maid held the instrument now appeared to be nothing more than bits of colored rock. But this was undeniably what he had come so far and spent so much to obtain.

Without another thought for the creature in the water, he turned and ran to the horse which stood saddled and waiting beyond the cottage. He slid the harp into a sack hanging from the saddle, mounted, and galloped away toward the road which led home. Now he could count the days, nay the very hours, until the beautiful woman he loved would be so impressed with his gift to her that she took notice of him.

As night fell, he stopped to take his rest at a humble inn. He brought the harp, safe inside the burlap sack from curious eyes, up to his small chamber with him. For a long time before he lay down to sleep, he stared at the harp, wondering if he dared satisfy the itching in his fingers to try just a few notes on it. At last he decided against this, convinced that an instrument that could produce only beautiful sounds deserved to be touched only by someone as beautiful as the woman he loved.

And yet, when Aren had finally lain down to sleep and pulled the coverlet up to his chin, one nagging doubt persisted. He had never heard a single note from the harp. What if the Bethshima was playing some trick on him? The ancient stories he'd read were filled with incidents in which a sea-maid played her human lover false. More than half the spells he'd found and used were intended to keep her from being able to betray him in the end. He must continue to put his faith in the spells.

At the end of three days riding, Aren reached the capital. No one in the palace appeared to have noticed that he had been away, not even the other young men he thought of as his friends. When he had washed the dirt of the road from his body and decked himself out in his finest wine-red velvet tunic, he picked up the harp in its rough burlap sack and went to seek out his ladylove and present it to her.

She was seated in her favorite music room, an assortment of infatuated young men fawning over her. Aren paused in the doorway and frowned. Had he looked as foolish as her current admirers? For a moment, he even dared to think that she was not nearly as beautiful in real life as she was in his memory. He shook his head to clear it. Why was he thinking of a mother-of-pearl comb being drawn through long, golden hair? Why did the voice of the woman in front of him seem harsh in comparison to the one that called to him from the sea?

Quickly, he crossed the room to where she sat, went down on one knee before her, drew out the sea-king's harp, and began to relate how his love for her had driven him to fulfill her wish to have it.

She looked down her nose at him and laughed. "Oh my, another sea-king's harp?" She gestured to a servant. "Put it on the shelf over there with the rest. At the back, if you please, since this one is rather plain-looking."

Aren turned then and saw her collection of instruments. The finest of them gleamed golden and the costly gems along its frame glittered in the candlelight. He pulled the real harp against his chest to keep the servant from taking it. "My love, someone has played you false. This is the true sea-king's harp, and it was put into my hands by one of the sea-king's own daughters." He asked himself why he had never noticed until now the harshness of her eyes when she spoke to those who admired her. "If you will but play it, you will find that the most beautiful music in all the world comes from its strings."

She sighed a bit impatiently. "I doubt a single true note could be coaxed from that bit of bone and cat-gut. Esteban, do you bring me the golden harp and sit here at my side while we show this poor fool what true beauty is." A slender, soft-cheeked boy in palest sky-blue silk hurried to do her bidding.

"But, milady, you are my love, my heart, my very soul," Aren protested. "If you will but let me strike a few notes for you on this harp, so that you may know that I speak only the truth–"

She pushed her hand toward him in a

Artwork by Alan Guiterrez

gesture of dismissal. "Your passionate declarations bore me. Someone remove this youngster from my sight until he can learn what will truly please me."

As he rode toward the flaming colors of the sunset, Aren cursed himself for being several kinds of a fool. His fingers flexed impatiently on the reins as he imagined them closing around Bethshima's neck. He could hardly wait to tell her what he thought of the trick she'd played on him in spite of the protective spells he'd uttered.

Jealousy. That was the only possible explanation for what she had done. Since he was not free to offer the sea-maid his heart, she had decided that he deserved to be made a fool of in front of his true love. He would show her what happened to those who sought to make him appear foolish! She would rue the day she had responded to the spells he had found out to draw her up the inlet to the cottage. She would pay the price for the mortification he'd experienced in front of his friends. No wonder not a one of them wanted to call him friend now.

When he reached the little fishing village called Land's End, he urged the horse into a canter even though darkness had almost fallen. There would be an end to this whole business this very evening, he swore beneath his breath. He could not bear to wait another moment to see her, to tell her – damn it, he had come all this way to scold her for her heartless cruelty, hadn't he?

He did not even take the time to stable his horse, sliding from its back as soon as he rode into the hardened dirt yard between cottage and stable. Grasping the sea-king's harp in one hand, he ran down the grassy slope to the rock where he'd sat to talk to he. It was the very spot where he had seen her sleeping that morning which now seemed another lifetime ago.

Aren stepped up on the rock and looked out across the water in the inlet, seeking some telling ripple in the moonlight, straining his ears to catch even the tiniest splash or note of an alluring song. There was nary a sign of any living thing in the water.

"Bethshima!" he cried out. What if she had given up when he seized the harp and rode away? What if she was never going to come to this place again? What if he never saw her all the rest of his life? He felt more alone than he had when he'd slunk out of the palace in shame. "Bethshima, where are you?"

There was no answer but the call of a sea owl carried on the night wind.

He waited and watched for some sign of the sea-maid although the night air was cold and set him shivering inside the luxurious wine-colored tunic he had not bothered to remove before riding away from the capital. At last, however, he had to admit to himself that she was not coming back to him. He went down on one knee and began to sob.

The fingers of his free hand touched something slippery lying atop the rock. He blinked away his tears and looked down at what seemed to be some sort of animal's digestive organ. A sticky substance stuck to the tips of his fingers. Tentatively, he raised them to his lips and tasted. Poison! He spat it out and rinsed his hand quickly.

Oh gods, what if she had killed herself in despair, believing that he had abandoned her forever? And if she had drunk it here, would he find her rotting, bloated corpse nearby in among the sea grasses?

"Forgive me, Bethshima!" he cried up to the stars. "My heart has been yours all along, and I was too much a fool to know it until it was too late to tell you."

The sea-king's harp was still clutched in his left hand. In one blinding moment of realization, Aren knew what a profanity it would have been if the harp had been played for any other purpose than to set the poem he had recited for Bethshima to music. He was glad that the woman he had mistakenly believed he loved had been a heartless bitch who refused his gift.

He balanced the whalebone frame on his knee and put his fingers to the harpstrings.

Aren did not remember leaving the water's edge and going into the little stone house, but he must have done it, since when he awoke it was morning and he was lying on the narrow cot inside the building.

With a moan of despair, he threw one arm across his eyes, trying to bring back the dream which he had been enjoying. In the dream, Bethshima was not dead. She had lain with him on this very cot, and most wonderful of all, she had two legs instead of her fishy tail.

"*When you rode away, my love,*" she had explained in his dream, "*I wanted to die and so I drank the potion which my aunt the sea-witch had prepared. But instead of killing me, it turned me into one of your kind. That was to be my punishment for having fallen in love with you.*"

"*But what punishment is there, since we have discovered that we truly love each other after all?*" *he had asked moments before showing her what humans who loved each other did for pleasure.*

When the sun rose, she slipped from the cot where they had slept entwined in each other's arms and legs and, wrapping the blue checkered tablecloth around her for modesty's sake, stepped outside the cottage with a promise to bring him sweet berries for them to eat together as their morning –

Aren's reverie was cut off by the familiar sound of Wyckel's pony-drawn cart outside the cottage. He heard the frantic barking of the little black and white dog. He swore under his breath, for he did not want to let go of the paradise of his dream just yet. "I would rather dream my life away, if that is the only way I can be with you, my love," he whispered. Outside, the dog's sharp barking moved toward the stable. Aren threw his legs over the edge of the cot and sat up.

The blue checkered table cover was gone. He looked back at the bedcovers and saw a single long golden hair lying beside the indentation his own head had made in the pillow. It could not be! Aren leaped to his feet and ran to the open door of the cottage even as truth slid its ice-cold blade between his ribs to touch its point against his thudding heart.

The dog's anxious yipping changed to a low, ominous growl as it finally reached its prey.

❧

MARY K. FREY lives in rural Pennsylvania near Gettysburg, and enjoys tennis and horseback riding. She has been a contributor to four anthologies, including the newest SWORD & SORCERESS. In addition, she hosts anextremely lively topic on Genie , the national computer network, where she entertains with Regency-era mysteries told several paragraphs a day until they are concluded. She has submitted a novel for publication, but has not heard if it has sold.

ALAN GUTIERREZ lives in Sedona, Arizona, with his wife and young daughter, and is a well-known cover artist. He was recently Artist Guest of Honor at NorWesCon in Seattle; one of the pieces from this very story was published as the cover of the Pocket Program.

MARGARET DAVIS did the illuminated capitals for this story, with their sea-inspired backgrounds. She lives in Berkeley, California, where she and her husband have a band called MAGIC FIRE.

Artwork by Gail Butler

Changes

by David R. Addleman

Denny Laughton sat in his wheelchair looking through Zeiss binoculars, searching for the gray streak that had caught his attention. There, cutting through the waist-high green barley, was a dog, running all out. Every once in a while it leaped like an exuberant puppy. The dog angled closer and Denny saw it was full grown. Lean and thin, it resembled an oversized German Shepherd.

Suddenly the dog lurched sideways and skidded down into the grass. Denny heard the crack of a rifle. His breath stopped. A tightness formed in the pit of his stomach. He jerked up the glasses and saw a man running towards the dog. The dog stayed low and kept moving.

Denny saw the grass rippling in a straight line towards the hedge at the border of his yard. Looking at the point where the dog would exit the tall grass, he caught a flash of gray disappearing into the thick hedge. Smart dog, Denny thought, wiping away angry tears. Lie still, boy. He won't find you in there.

Denny looked back and saw the hunter crisscrossing through the barley, apparently unable to find the trail.

By the time Denny wheeled into his elevator and rode down to ground level, the hunter was gone. If he could reach the wounded dog in time, maybe he could help. For once he wished he weren't so isolated, or that Mrs. McCraken hadn't already finished her cooking and cleaning chores and gone home. Never mind, he'd do what he could.

The grass on his back lawn was cut short and the ground was dry. He pushed down hard on the leading edge of his wheels, propelling the chair forward, his hands growing moist inside the leather gloves.

"Here, boy! Come on out," he called. The only response was a faint rustling. "Come on, boy," he crooned. "I won't hurt you."

The unexpected moan straightened him up. It sounded more human than canine. "Who's in there?" he demanded. Silence lifted the hairs on his neck.

Finally, he wheeled back inside, rode upstairs, and repositioned himself at the upstairs window. He watched the sun drop into the foothills and the hedge become a dark smear in the gloom. Still, Denny waited. When it was too dark to see, he switched to infra-red night glasses, quartering on the section of hedge where the dog had entered.

The movement, when it came, was so subtle he almost missed it. A shadowy figure crawled out of the hedge. No dog this. He strained to make out details as the figure stood on two legs, but the night scope's resolution on its luminous green display wasn't that sharp. The ghostly figure stumbled a few steps across his back lawn and collapsed. Denny rushed downstairs, remembering to grab the flashlight off its hook by the back door.

She lay where she'd fallen. The flashlight in her face brought no response. Naked, her skin was badly lacerated by the brambles, her body slick with blood.

Denny positioned the wheelchair alongside her. The problem, as he saw it, was to pick up and carry her into the house. He was afraid that leaning forward would pitch him out of the chair. So, he had to bring her in over the side. He reached sideways and buried his right hand in her hair, then tugged steadily until he'd raised her into a sitting position against his right wheel.

The next part worried him. He raised her left arm and reached across with his left hand to grab her elbow, then hooked his right hand under her right armpit. He lifted, twisting her body as he did so. The tendon-stretching effort caused his biceps to shake uncontrollably, but he kept on until her chest cleared the armrest and he could fold her over his legs. He knew a moment of disbelief that he'd actually done it, before he collapsed over her, gasping.

The rest was easier. Regaining his breath, he maneuvered his left hand under her neck, his right hand under one thigh, then lifted her over his head and onto his shoulders in a fireman's carry. He wheeled her slowly into the house.

Denny dumped her on the couch, face down, and slumped back feeling like he'd just won a marathon. Pleased at what he'd been able to do, he spun around and went looking for first-aid equipment.

Returning with half the contents of his medicine cabinet, plus warm water and towels, he began sponging off blood and dirt. He blotted her dry, then began applying mercurochrome to the

scratches. He turned her over and got his first good look at her.

Her pale face had finely chiseled features, with straight and thin nose, delicate cheekbones, long lashes, and slightly peaked eyebrows. She had thick, lustrous, black hair and carmine lips.

He ignored her nakedness, being momentarily more concerned with cleaning and treating her wounds. Later, maybe, he'd think about her firm breasts and taut stomach.

She opened her eyes and regarded him with pupils of a startling green luminescence.

"Who are you?" Instead of surprise, she showed an unnatural calm.

"Denny Laughton. That was my hedge you attacked."

She smiled at that. "Your hedge won."

He finished treating the scratches. "There." He handed her a coverlet from the foot of the couch.

She unhurriedly draped it over herself. He knew those scratches must hurt, but she endured the covering without complaint. "Who helped bring me in?" she asked.

"No one." Pride and an undefinable excitement filled his chest. Denny glanced down at his useless legs and slapped his right thigh. "These may be dead, but my arms aren't." Except, he thought, they'd take a while to recover from that strenuous lift. She didn't have to know that. Exhausted muscles still quivered in his arms, shoulders, and across his ribs. Tomorrow, he'd feel the full extent of the damage.

She raised up on her elbows. "You live alone?"

"Sure. Mrs. McCraken comes in daily. She cleans up and cooks."

"I'm Karen Banks," she said, extending a hand. The cover slid off, exposing a breast. "Whoops." Laughing, she added, "I suppose it's a bit late for modesty."

Denny smiled. "Nope. You can be as modest as you want."

Karen lay quietly for a moment. A shadow crossed her features. "How did you know I was out there?" she asked, with slightly raised eyebrows.

"Saw you from my second story window." She looked puzzled, so he added, "I have an elevator."

She still seemed troubled. "It's dark, the moon is hidden."

"I used a modified sniper scope. Picks up infra-red images."

"Oh." Then, "But how did you know to look?"

He took a deep breath. "Okay. About twilight, I saw a dog shot by a hunter. That dog burrowed into my hedge. When I went to investigate, I heard a human moan."

To cover the thick silence, Denny wheeled around to the refrigerator, pulled open the door to expose a well-supplied interior. "Something to drink?"

"Actually, I'm hungry." The curves and planes of her face shifted. She looked suddenly waiflike.

"How does Hungarian Goulash sound?"

She blinked slowly. "Heavenly."

The silence lengthened while he scooped the goulash into a plastic bowl, covered it with plastic wrap, and stuck it in the microwave. "Ready in two minutes. I've got milk, white wine, and two or three fruit juices to go with it."

"Milk, please."

"So," Karen said, "you waited to see what would emerge from your hedge." The brightness in her green eyes belied the casualness of her words.

The microwave beeped. Grateful for the interruption, Denny poured the goulash into a bowl on a tray. He added a French roll with butter, utensils, and napkin. Rolling closer, he set the tray on an end table. A second round trip brought her the milk.

"Thank you." She scooted over to the end of the couch and ate ravenously.

"Does the change always make you that hungry?"

She blinked and gave him a long, appraising look.

"Not so naive after all, are you?" She studied him. "In fact, you're pretty quick."

He shook his head. "Not really. I thought it out while doctoring your scratches."

"And you're not afraid of me?"

"Should I be?" Denny spun around to face the sliding glass doors leading to the back yard. After studying the reflection of himself in the wheelchair for a moment, he turned and looked over his shoulder. "It's an interesting concept."

"What concept?"

"Metamorphosis, and its curative power. Remember, I saw you shot as a wolf. You flew sideways from the impact."

"And?" she prompted.

"Now, the only wounds on your body are scratches on your human skin." He drew in breath and held it.

Her eyes flashed. "I see. . . ."

"Yes." His heart pounded wildly. "The question is, If I metamorphosed, would I be a wolf paralyzed from the waist down, or would I be able to run? And when I regained human form, would I still be disabled?"

"I honestly don't know." She sat up, pulling the small blanket tightly around her. "I do know this –" she hesitated, making her hand into a metaphorical claw, "– thing is a curse."

"To you, maybe. But to me?" He slapped his thigh for emphasis. The sharp sound made her jump.

Karen stared back as pinkness crept into her cheeks. "I'm not going to bite you because you feel like going for a run," she whispered.

"I didn't ask you to bite me."

"That's what it takes, my saliva in your blood," she said. Jumping up, she said coldly, "I'd better go."

"You'd better take a few clothes," he said, wishing she'd stay longer. "Besides, I may need the blanket for my next rescue."

They rode up in the small elevator. He showed her his bedroom and his window. She was fascinated by his night-vision scope. "Are there many of these around?"

"I doubt it. Few people sit for hours looking out into the night." He saw her puzzlement. "I watch the night drama. You know, victims, hunters."

She gazed at him for a long instant, then nodded. "I know."

He threw her jeans and a sweatshirt, then sat transfixed as she dropped the blanket and put them on. Maybe he should look away, but he couldn't. The sweatshirt hanging to her knees struck him as funny and he laughed. She glanced down and smiled.

"Thank you," she said, "for everything."

"My pleasure," he said, trying not to sound lascivious. "Will you think about my question?"

Her face froze. She turned and bounded down the stairs. The front door clicked shut a few seconds later.

Two nights later he was at the window with a sense of loss. That was ridiculous, he'd only known her a few hours. Still, he missed her.

He had long ago accepted his paralysis, but meeting Karen had turned his thoughts inward. He thought about how the family car had skidded off into a gully. Mom and Dad had been killed. He – "Lucky kid," a doctor said – was hardly hurt, except for a crushed spinal

column.

He liked his life. Dad's money had gotten him through college. He had books, tapes, and video disks for entertainment. He drove a specially-equipped car and could go nearly anywhere without assistance.

His thoughts were interrupted by a long, drawn-out howl. Searching with his night glasses, he caught the she-wolf, head raised, rendering her song. She pranced to right, cut left, gave a final "yip" and was gone. Even that tenuous contact filled him with warm excitement.

"Good hunting, Karen," he whispered.

She came back the next two nights and repeated her song, then stopped coming. A week passed with no sign of her and he worried that maybe she'd been hurt. Maybe the hunter had gotten her. Not liking the direction of his thoughts, he called an old friend from school who worked for the phone company.

After getting Karen Banks' number and address, he staked out her house and spent three fruitless, shivering nights waiting. When a car finally did drive up, and he saw Karen climb out of the driver's seat, the strength of his relief caught him off guard.

"It shouldn't, you dolt," he said aloud. He'd been in love since that first night and no use pretending otherwise. Crouching low, he watched Karen lift a suitcase from her trunk. He exhaled, surprised at how long he'd been holding his breath. She'd been on a trip.

Her familiar song that night made him laugh aloud. He wanted to talk with her, find an excuse to touch her again. He watched through his night glasses. Suddenly, a hunter – maybe the same one – stepped from behind a tree, a hundred yards beyond her. A red flash told Denny the man was using a sniper scope. Karen darted away before the hunter could fire.

He had failed this time, but if she continued her nightly serenading, he might not. Denny had to warn her.

He telephoned late that night. "Karen? Denny Laughton."

A low chuckle. "Somehow I thought you'd figure out a way to get my number."

Artwork by Gail Butler

"Did you see the hunter tonight?"

"I smelled him. Didn't you notice I stayed away from him?"

"Not far enough," he said. "The man is using a sniper scope. Calibrated properly, it's accurate to 1,000 yards."

"Only if I remain stationary."

"Or," he added, "move predictably."

She was silent. "You're right. I shouldn't be so cavalier about it."

"Is it true you can only be killed with a silver bullet?"

The silence grew until he was afraid she wouldn't answer. "I'm not sure, although with the recuperative powers of the change, I'll probably survive if I'm alive when I start the change. But if a hunter blows off my head or puts a large enough hole in me, I don't think it will matter whether the bullet is silver or lead."

"Then, don't announce yourself," he said testily. "Change your territory. Protect yourself."

"I'm the hunter, not the prey. I won't sneak around like a rabbit." A chill he didn't recognize was in her voice.

Denny decided it was up to him.

Early the next day he purchased a 30.06 rifle with a ten-power scope, and a vise. A simple daylight scope was enough for his purposes. Back in his bedroom, he pulled up a table and clamped the vise on it.

Long minutes were spent in sighting in on the hunter's tree. On two different occasions the man had stood next to that same tree and Denny was betting he'd stand by it again.

At nine-thirty he heard her beautiful, drawn-out howl. Denny studied the tree through the night glasses. The hunter suddenly materialized.

"Okay, let's see how you like being hunted," Denny muttered.

He slipped off the safety while continuing to watch through his night glasses. The rifle was sighted in on the tree and locked securely into position. The hunter was safe, but he didn't know that. Denny squeezed the trigger. A split-second later the hunter jumped back, snapping his head towards the tree. He ducked when the sound of the shot reached him. Denny inserted another bullet, closed the bolt, and fired again.

The hunter stumbled away from the tree and began running, weaving to keep from being targeted. The sound of the second shot reached him. He swerved violently and fell. Scrambling up, leaves flying, he ran into the trees.

It was 3 AM when the phone rang.

"What did you do to our intrepid hunter?" Karen asked.

"Gave him a taste of his own medicine." He told her about sighting in on the tree.

She laughed when he described the hunter's wild scramble. "So," she said, "now you're both my rescuer and protector."

The next night the doorbell rang. He went down and opened the door. His chest constricted at the sight of Karen standing on the steps. She said nothing as she extended something. He took the small package and examined it. When he raised his head, she was walking rapidly away.

A week later Denny sat on the back lawn in his wheelchair. He levered up on his hands and pushed off, pitching forward onto the grass. It'd been a long, rough week.

She'd told him she wouldn't bite him, but in the package was a syringe filled with clear liquid. Elated, he injected it immediately. Next, he called Mrs. McCraken and told her he was leaving on a trip and wouldn't need her until he returned.

His fever raged for three days, accompanied by cramping muscles, aching joints, and unrelenting thirst. He kept a record of his rising temperature the first day, then gave up in disgust after it reached 106° F. What good were records? He was in for the duration, whatever happened. At one point he was sure he was dying. His last conscious thought was that if given another chance, he'd do it again.

He awoke much later, surprised to be alive and feeling better. His fever was down to 102°.

It was night and pitch black inside. Turning on the lights, he saw animal hairs on the floor and scratches on the back door. He whooped weakly and fainted.

Now he lay in the back yard with his face buried in the cool, moist grass, waiting. He heard the first beautiful notes float through the night, tugging at his soul.

Denny's body responded with a violent wrenching. Going into shock muted the initial agony. A succession of spasms ripped his skeleton. He vomited, then rolled on his back, gasping. After an eternity, he raised off his stomach, stood, and stretched. He ran in a tight circle until he'd loosened up. Suddenly he angled for the hedge, leaped, and cleared it easily.

He loped into the night, searching for the singer of his dreams.

❧

David R. Addleman is a software engineer at Boeing, and is married and has a young son. He enjoys competitive swimming as well as doing a lot of reading and writing. He has sold 21 short stories and a novel, and has been a member of Mystery Writers of America for eleven years.

Gail Butler is well-known in the Northwest as an artist and a fan. She is an ex-military-wife, musician, barber, and an antique restorer as well as an expert at drawing figures and animals. In her spare time she is a volunteer Jewish mother to Northwest art fandom.

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P.O. Box 249,
Berkeley, CA 94701.

Andre Norton says that the requirements for the Gryphon Contest are as follows:

The writer must be a woman who has sold two stories or one novel, but not more than two novels. The entry must be an unpublished novel, and it must be fantasy, not science fiction. The novel must be accompanied by a SASE (Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope) with sufficient postage for its return, and it must reach Miss Norton by 31 May 1992.

The prize is $500 and a very nice looking trophy.

The address for entries is:
Andre Norton, 1600 Spruce Avenue, Winter Park, FL 32789.

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Letters

NEW ARRIVAL!

Lynne Armstrong-Jones and hubby are pleased to announce the arrival of Megan Melanie Armstrong-Jones on November 19, 1991. Lynne writes: "Yes. My biggest project is now complete — or perhaps I should say, she's just begun! With a son and a daughter now, all I have to do is find time (and energy) to continue writing! (How DID you do it, Marion?) At any rate, you KNOW I'll keep writing...after just a BIT of time off first!"

It's very simple...if I didn't write, my kids and I went hungry! (Of course, I'd be the last person to claim that I was writing deathless prose during those years). Anyway, congratulations, Lynne, from all of us. Like writing, raising children is a labor of love. We'll look forward to more stories from you in a few months. — MZB

TAKING A FANTASY BREAK

Carol A. Lindstrom, Gainesville, FL

To all of those responsible for writing, editing, producing, and distribution: my thanks to you. As an investigator of child abuse, I deal primarily with a rather unique version of reality. Fortunately (for my survival) I have this magazine to help me remember that other realities exist. Hopes, dreams, and the potential for change do exist, and each edition of your magazine boldly states this.

Keep up your good work, Carol — and we'll do our best to keep the fantasy coming your way. — MZB, REH, and the FM Staff

ORAL ROBBERS?

Kate Bledsoe, Jefferson, GA

I am one of your new subscribers and am very pleased with your magazine. I would like to incorporate some of the short stories into my story-telling repertoire, but I am not at all sure what type of permission I would need to do so, or how to credit those stories...In light of the fact that I don't wish to "steal" a story, only borrow with permission, could you send me some information? Some of the recent stories that would translate well into spoken form would be "Ghostdance" from issue #13 and "Black Ribbon" from issue #14.

You're right, it's always better to ask permission before using someone's work in ANY form, and to give proper credit when it's due. Upon publication in our magazine, all rights for a story revert to its author. We do not give out our authors' addresses, but we will happily forward letters to them if they are addressed as follows: Writer's Name, c/o Marion Zimmer Bradley Ltd., PO Box 249, Berkeley, CA 94701. Be sure to leave room beneath our address so we can write in the author's forwarding address. Thank you for your professional courtesy, Kate! — JAR

LOOKIN' GOOD

Jan van't Ent, Capelle aan den Ijssel, Netherlands

...#14...was a very beautiful issue. To begin with, I really liked the cover illustration (the muted colors worked well with the silver lettering) which in itself made the magazine look very distinguished...I know I didn't subscribe for the pretty pictures, but for the fantastic stories, but I really enjoyed this issue even before starting to read it. It was only fitting to include the artists with the Cauldron vote!

We had several letters echoing your sentiments, Jan. I am not any kind of judge of art, but I know what I like; and I certainly think Rachel has done a great job finding artists to illustrate the stories appropriately. — MZB

Appreciation from folks like you makes this job worthwile! Cover artist Gail Butler will appreciate your complimentary remarks, too. —REH

Tasha Halpert, Grafton, MA

I applaud the new method of having (biographies of) the authors and illustrators at the ends of their stories instead of grouped (onto one page) as in the past. It is far more meaningful to be able to read something about the person right then and there and not after you've long finished his or her story...

I agree. Reading a good story often makes you want to know more about the person who wrote it. Our writers and artists submit their own biographies, which we edit for publication. — MZB

INTER-VIEW-POINTS

Douglas Lent, Wareham, MA

Regarding my comments on the Pat Murphy interview [see issue #14]...I hope you don't think I've anything against people expressing their opinions...It was just the way the interviewers went about it that gave me a vaguely uneasy feeling. Perhaps this is an interview style which I had not encountered before. Anyway, I had no such problems with the same two interviewers' piece on Teresa Edgerton, which was very good. So good, in fact, that I'm now trying to find that author's books...I hope to see more such interviews in future issues.

Don't worry, you will! — MZB

Thornton Kimes, Seattle, WA

My 2 cents about interviewers and their opinions is the same as my opinion about journalism in general: who sez ya havta be, or can be, objective and/or neutral? ...WHY NOT have interviews with agendas flowing freely — not just those of the author in question. I don't agree with EVERYTHING Harlan Ellison says, but he can be fun to read — yer NEVER in the dark about what he thinks.

It's probably impossible to be objective; but we, and the interviewers, do try to be fair. — MZB

WRITER'S GROUPS: WHEN THEY'RE GOOD...

Faith L. Justice, New York, NY

I second Ms. Lackey's comments on writer's circles. When they are good, they can be very, very good. I'm a member of a writer's group that has been meeting for nearly two years. Of the eleven members, five of us have placed multiple stories in paying markets and the rest have publishable stories circulating in the pro and small press. I personally attribute our success to several factors. (1) We formed from an adult education writer's workshop focussed on sf and fantasy writing... (2) We are a very diverse group...both sexes in nearly equal numbers, several races, an age range of 30+ years, and varying "real" jobs. (Sorry, Marion, no plumbers.) (3) We keep the meetings for business. We set ground rules and focus on the basics: plot, characterization, and style...We keep a group journal documenting the stories reviewed, celebrating our acceptances and commenting on our progress. (4) We share market information. I keep a data base of over 200 markets and do searches for members based on type of story and word count. We share copies of guidelines... (5) We "nudge" one another to keep writing. (6) We have gotten to know each other as people...What is necessary is to be honest with one another about your expectations of the group...

Yes, and it's important to stay focussed on WRITING, and not become distracted by the power dynamics and interpersonal difficulties of the group. Your example is heartening — keep up the good writing! — MZB

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

Queen of Summer Forests

Isabel Cole

Above the clearing the trees sighed as if they, too, ached to sleep. While her riding clothes dried from her accidental dip in the stream, Colchinay sat in the grass, leaning against mossy tree roots, wearing a light robe with sinuous patterns that made Dieter dizzy as his eyes tried to follow them. He could not tell which were threads and which were her black hairs. He stretched out beside her and rested his head in her lap. In the forest there were soft stirrings, like children falling asleep. The thick curtains of gold-green light made the way for the moment impassable. Even after these years of wandering, Dieter could almost forget the bargain he had made, in a desperate moment, with Death: as long as he stayed no longer than a day in one place Death would not touch him.

Colchinay, a fellow wayfarer met by chance, bore his endless wandering without a word of complaint; she did not speak to him at all. She was not mute, for she spoke to herself, or sang, in a strange language, and she understood every word that was said around her. Whether her silence was curse or whim he did not know, and only she could explain it to him. They had few arguments; he was powerless against her eloquent silence.

"I wish I could stay here all day," he murmured. "Let Death try to catch me here!" He was asleep. Over the stream a cloud of tiny insects whirled in the sun.

Colchinay's legs began to fall asleep. She picked a dandelion and stuck it behind Dieter's ear, as she often did to tease him; then she carefully moved his head from her lap and stood up. She walked downstream, signing to the stream and the trees and the minnows in the shadows. To speak to them, and to spirits and ghosts, she had forsworn human tongues. She sat on a rock by the stream and watched the water striders skate across the surface, throwing delicate shadows on the bottom. The patterns of her robe wriggled like weeds in water.

Dieter lay asleep like a small boy, brown-haired and mud-splattered, with grass stains on his breeches. His sword lay carelessly across his drying clothes. Insects drifted almost invisibly about him and disappeared into the trees. A breeze lifted the branches, and the whole forest seemed to turn slightly and look at him.

He opened his eyes and looked at the trees. He felt he had fallen asleep in a distant lost place and awakened here, or that he was waking here for the first time at all. He did not know who he was, but that did not disturb him, for he was full of eagerness as he looked up into the trees. He stood up and ran to the stream. Blinking, he started upstream, towards the sun, which began to melt free of clinging leaves. He jumped lightly from rock to rock, splashing through the shallows. The banks rose until they were above his head, but the sun blazed down the white stone walls and the glassy water that rushed endlessly toward Dieter. It burned on his bare chest and confused his sight, and the silence pressed close to his temples. He heard music then, and voices close by, just behind him, a wide, quiet current of delighted laughter.

He turned slowly and saw no stream, but marble steps and terraces falling down the hillside through the forest as far as he could see. Clustered by pale statues and the molten water of fountains were groups of lovely people in clothing of grey gauze. They were so slim and frail, and darted so quickly in their dances, that in the distance they disappeared in the blazing sunlight, just as sometimes the faint music faded and Dieter had to strain forward to hear it in the whisper of the trees.

A breeze touched his back, cool and smelling of wet stone and flowers. He turned and shadow fell over him like a cool hand brushing away the burning sun. He was in an open colonnade surrounding a shallow pool, by which a woman sat motionless. He walked through the shadows, past the greened pillars and tangles of ivy, until he stood behind her.

"Hail, wanderer," she said. "Your journey has been brief. You were born not an hour ago to turn your path here. Sit by me." He sat by her feet at the edge of the pool, although the sunlight made him drowsy. Her long black hair gleamed like lacquer against her voluminous white robes. He was uncomfortable under the gaze of the large dark eyes that seemed to see at once everything around her. Her hand lifted as lightly as if the wind had blown it, and she took the dandelion

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

from behind his ear, her thin dry fingers brushing his cheek.

"I shall give you more beautiful flowers," she said. Her voice surprised him; for a minute he had imagined that she could not speak to him, though why he expected her to be mute, he did not know. She tossed the dandelion into the pool, and he watched it disappear among the water lilies, trying to remember picking it. Shapes rushed fluttering through the pillars, converging on Dieter, each barely-seen hand tossing flowers into his lap until they spilled over onto the stones.

The woman leaned forward, smiling, drinking in the hot sunlight and the dying breaths of the flowers. She looked at him as transfixed as if he were a kaleidoscope, rainbow-edged and continually falling into new crystalline patterns. He saw her breathing very clearly; her whole body seemed to swell and sink with it, and the wide white sleeve of her robe rose and fell like softly stirring wings. She remained motionless for a long time, and he dared not move.

Colchinay returned to the clearing, found Dieter gone, and gave a small shrug of annoyance. She sat in the grass to wait, laying his sword across her knees, drawing it and lifting it experimentally in the air. The sun glanced down the length of the blade, and she blinked painfully. It was odd that he should wander off for so long, without telling her first, and leaving behind most of his clothes. It worried her most that he had left his sword carelessly in the grass – she didn't entirely trust him to defend himself without it.

She stood on the bank of the stream, listening. There were rumors of Dieter in the sunlight that jumped up from the water, a glimpse of him hurrying, jumping from white stone to white stone, his hand shading his eyes as he tried to look upstream. The minnows remembered swerving around his impatient feet, and the gnats recalled the sound of his quick eager breathing. Each glimpse disquieted Colchinay even more, even as they drew her longingly; he had fled so eagerly that she feared her pursuit might be vain. She struggled upstream through bands of sunlight and cool shadow. A dandelion clung to a rock, lapped by the glare of the water that had carried it downstream. Colchinay picked it out of the water. It was quite bruised and sodden. She felt a sharp pang of anger and loss. Dropping the wet blossom in her pocket, she desperately pursued the phantom glimpses of Dieter. So intent was she that she did not notice shapes in the sunlight as fragile and quick as the shadows that water striders cast on the stream bed, nor hear sweet reedy music.

Letting out a sharp breath of relief, she stopped short. Dieter was just across the stream, sitting up on the bank in the tangled grass, staring intently into the stream. She called his name, in case he was only playing a trick on her. His mouth did not even twitch. The sun gilded his hair, and a white butterfly danced around him. His eyes fixed on the air beside Colchinay, he smiled and frowned to the emptiness.

Colchinay's smile died as she saw he was under a spell. She sat on a rock in the shade to think. Angrily she tossed pebbles into the water. She could leave him there until the spell tired of him and he woke with cramped muscles, a sunburn, and a great thirst. He might wake in a minute, or a week, but next morning Death would come and take him from the spell, if he could not move himself. She wanted to drag him bodily from the spot, throw him across the neck of the horse, and ride until they were far from the forest. As she looked up at him, she knew she could not touch him. He was so distant that she almost felt ashamed for watching him, as if he were an otherworldly creature lost in innocent transports of joy. She would harm beyond healing if he did not some to her willingly.

She opened her eyes and ears and turned downstream to face the spell. The marble terraces stretched down into the golden forest haze, and the dim forms darted and drifted as quickly as the light danced up from the fountains. No one was meant to see this but Dieter. Colchinay trespassed upon his illusion, hoping to find his memory sleeping there. She walked casually down the white steps, toward the distant silver forms; in their delicate eddies she might find the key to this spell. They were giddy flights of expectation, of celebrants waiting for the greatest feast, the most dazzling spectacle.

Before she could reach them, Colchinay's eyes were caught by a more mundane commotion in a grove a dozen yards removed from the white terraces. She approached cautiously, slipping from tree to tree, in order to overhear the conversation.

Standing in the grass was a long table, covered with a white cloth, bearing dozens of silver dishes with every fruit, spice, grain, and meat Colchinay had ever seen. Before it burned several large fires, but

kettles and pots lay on the grass unused. Several disconsolate creatures sat around the largest fire on overturned kettles; humans put together from a sketchy description and an assortment of twigs, dry leaves, dead moths, and spider silk. Their voices were reedy, and, at the moment, strained to raggedness.

"A man! Food for a man!" cried one wildly, throwing up its twiggy hands. "The feast in two hours and not fruit, not honey is good enough for the Queen, but we must have food that men eat. Now I ask you –" it looked around pleadingly "– where should I have learned the habits of Man? I never saw one in my life before this." There was a worried rustle of assent.

It sprang up and ran to the table. "This is human fare, she says. Well, I'll give it to her. What else can I do?" It snatched up a pot and ran up and down the table, throwing handfuls of food in haphazardly. After exchanging a few concerned glances, the other creatures joined in dutifully. Unpeeled apples were flung in, followed by loaves of bread, a wheel of cheese, a pound of peppercorns, a ham, a fruitcake, a bottle of wine which shattered against the side of the pot. When it was full to the brim they lifted it with much complaining and dropped it in the middle of the fire. They sat in the grass and watched.

"Smell anything?" said one after a while.

"It smells good!" replied one encouragingly.

Their apparent leader frowned musing. "Smells strange," it said. "Like nothing I've smelled."

"Then we must have gotten it right!" cried another happily. For a few minutes there was a clamor of the high, relieved, congratulatory voices. Then they quieted and stared raptly at the pot. The feathers of a pheasant, carelessly draped over the side, singed. A loaf of bread followed soon, and soon thick black smoke was billowing from the pot.

"That's not supposed to happen, is it?" asked one anxiously. They were galvanized into sudden panic, looking for water, trying to snatch the pot out, burning themselves. Colchinay rested against a tree, trying helplessly to stop laughing. At last she calmed herself, and called soothingly to the fire. The indignant foodstuffs settled into dead charcoal; the smoke, at Colchinay's suggestion, flew up into the sky and departed in search of new horizons. The creatures, returning laboriously with a tub of water, let it fall in surprise when they saw the docilely crackling fire, and began to cavort with glee.

"There must be a helpful spirit in the woods!" cried the leader. They stopped and peered reverently at sky and trees. Colchinay stepped out of the shadow, and was unable to keep from laughing at their surprise.

They drew back swiftly, like feathers before a gust of wind, and their beady eyes darted about questioningly at each other and her. For a minute they trembled so much that she was afraid they would flee, or simply fall to pieces before her eyes. Then, hesitantly, they began to whisper among themselves. "Not one of us...can't be human, it doesn't look like the one I saw...besides, look at the writing on it – I can almost read it...does it want to eat us?...it looks friendly."

"I *am* a friend," said Colchinay in the same thin, buzzing tone. "If I look strange it is because I have travelled a long way, and seen many things."

For a few minutes the creatures conferred, their voices taking on a high piping of nervous hope. "By any chance," asked their leader deferentially, "would you have encountered humans during your travels?"

"Quite often," replied Colchinay.

"And – have you observed their eating habits?"

"I have eaten with humans myself," said Colchinay. They rustled in awe. The sun was climbing; Colchinay continued just as the leader opened its mouth, "Yes," she said, "I can make you a feast for a man."

She brushed away their effusive thanks and inspected the laden table. For so long she had cooked and eaten nothing but stringy wild fowl and rabbits. Her mouth watered as she saw the fat, sleek ducks that looked as if they had been kept in a marble pool and fed with dainty herbs, fine bread and butter. It was comforting to see good food again, as it was comforting to speak – though she doubted she could have much conversation with these creatures. As she cleaned the duck the creatures stretched out in the grass, looking at her gratefully, and she asked them casually about the feast.

"Who is this man you speak of?"

"The Queen is going to marry him," they replied eagerly. Colchinay frowned.

"And," she said carefully, "what is your Queen like?"

They waved their hands, at a loss for words. "Beautiful!" they said helplessly. "Today – like you. Only much more beau-

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

tiful," they added. Colchinay set her lips in a firm line.

Here were all the ingredients for a dish she had long dreamed of – a roast duck she and Dieter had eaten in Ismailov. The spices were found only on the eastern coast, but there was a neat pile of them near the end of the table. After that roast duck she and Dieter had wandered the evening streets, glimpsing the many intriguing sights of Ismailov. Colchinay would gladly have stayed for months, but Dieter would have met Death there the next afternoon, so in the morning they took the road north, drifting ceaselessly away from that sundering presence.

"Behold, the feast hall is prepared," said the Queen, and Dieter took his eyes away from her reluctantly. It was much larger than he remembered; he sat on soft cushions in a pillared arch, looking across a wide pool filled with lilies. The white columns surrounding the pool barely hid the activity behind them, the graceful forms meeting and swirling; the soft, thrilling swell of voices; the music that spilled out across the glistening water. Other people gathered nearby, sitting on pillows, speaking quietly, smiling at him. He thought vaguely that they were not quite like him, but since he knew so little of himself he was not able to judge. "All week we shall feast here and not leave this place," said the Queen. "You shall always stay here, by me."

He did not know why, but at her words he felt an immense relief. There was nothing he wanted more than this stillness, nothing more than to sit motionless in the sunlight, never having to leave and go on. He could taste the stillness; it was honey that could only be gathered by waiting, faithful to one spot of sun and earth. He felt a longing, far past his brief memory, to taste it.

He did not need to move, he could not; he bloomed from the warm stones like a flower, only moving in the breeze, and he watched her as she circled him, her feet dancing light and unseen, her white sleeves swinging out and brushing him, her black hair gleaming blindingly. He could not make out her face in the flurry of white and black.

She settled before him, her robes falling to her sides and then stirring again with the light beat of her breathing.

There was now a new strand of smell in the air, richer and heavier than that of warm stone and water. Before him, on a small table, was a silver plate with a roast duck. It lay there, fat sizzling under its shiny brown skin, its crisp wings folded tightly. It was vaguely familiar, and it seemed to be waiting for him to remember it. The breeze blew the smell of fat and spices into his face again, and he remembered – they had been sitting by a fountain, a pool like this, tearing the paper wrapping from a hot roasted duck. She had taken out her knife and stolen both wings, which were her favorite part of the bird. She had laughed at him, her black hair blowing.

He lifted the silver knife from the platter and smiled at her. "You want the wing, of course," he said. She smiled back, but her gleaming hair lay still.

"Alas, I am too delicate for such fare." She lifted a shallow bowl of honey to her lips.

Dieter frowned, puzzled, and lifted the knife again. Before the knife touched it, the duck shuddered violently, rose up on the knobbed ends of its legs, stretched out its naked wings as if in warning, and uncoiled its crackling, wood-brown neck.

"I would never let myself be eaten by such a fool as you," it cried, and cast itself into the pool.

Dieter laid down the knife and glanced about him. The other guests laughed and sang as before. "Do feast dishes usually behave in this fashion?" he asked carefully, afraid of being thought naive.

Honey glistened on her lips, and she licked it. "I cannot say," she said. "I am not used to such coarse fare."

The following courses, although all reminiscent of distant pleasant times, were equally abusive, quick to insult or upbraid him, or merely to slip his grasp and fly away, while the gaiety around him continued undisturbed. The other guests, he noted, merely drank from shallow bowls, or nibbled fruit.

"Poor boy," she said gently. "This is most unkind." She held out a fig in the palm of her hand. He reached for it, shivering as he brushed her silk-soft, slim fingers, but a sprig of rosemary rose from his plate, wrapped itself around the fig, and flew away over the pool. For a moment the sharp, piney smell of rosemary cut through the Queen's scent of flowers and warm, shallow water. Then her scent returned; she surrounded him though neither of them moved. He felt that her

cool, wide sleeves waved on either side of him, brushing him lightly, shading him, stilling his hunger, muffling the accusations of the repast.

The sun began to sink. In the heavy red-gold light she seemed more languid, her breathing slower. He almost felt his own slowing with it. There was a guest he had not noticed before, a man who sat nearby and ate nothing, only watched Dieter with a kindly smile.

A tureen was placed before Dieter. Steam billowed up, and as it cleared he saw two silver fish covered in clear broth. He lifted up a spoon; the smell reminded him that he especially liked fish. He watched in resignation as one of the fish leaped from the bowl and vaulted into the pool. The other fish stood on its tail, swayed beseechingly, and cried to its mate, "Ah, would you leave me and forget me, as Dieter forgot Colchinay?" It rose up, with the broth following it in a glittering cascade, and plunged into the pool.

"Who are Dieter and Colchinay?" asked Dieter, frowning. He had heard the names before, there was a fleeing memory, if he had the chance to pursue it...

"Names from an old tale," said the new guest, smiling benignly.

"Oh, of course," said Dieter, feeling foolish.

"I know every tale that men have told," continued the other.

"I would like to hear them," said Dieter politely.

"In the morning you shall come to my house, and I shall tell them all to you."

Dieter was about to object, but he caught himself. Of course he would still be there in the morning. There was no need to go, to be far from here.

"But he is mine," said the woman in white, her black eyes wide and gentle, reassuring Dieter, and he trembled at their delicate touch. The other man smiled and raised his eyebrows.

Now a crystal goblet of wine was placed before Dieter, and the other guests raised sparkling glasses.

"This is the last course," said the Queen. "Then we shall sleep. It grows cold."

The light was red, dimming. Dieter's breath came slow, like hers. He felt himself settling gently together, his eyelids longing to fall closed like fine wings.

"Then I will wake you," said the man, "so that you may visit me in my house."

Dieter cupped the goblet in his hands, bracing himself for some parting stinging words. The wine was still and silent.

"Better not drink it," said the man. "It might make your sleep restless."

But Dieter had already smelled the wine, and he lifted it to his lips.

It did not flee, or mock him, and in the red-shot gold billowed one black hair. At the taste and smell he immediately remembered a woman, her scent of sweet fresh herbs and sharp dried spices, sitting at sunset in the window, raising her glass to him. The memory made him look at her now with still more ardent love, as she watched him in contentment, silent and sleepy, leaning against a pillar, her white robes spreading about her – although it seemed odd that they were blank, bare of patterns.

"I love you," he was about to say, gazing at her, his breath slowing blissfully, but the black hair slipped into his mouth and tangled around his tongue, tightening vengefully. He choked, fighting for breath, and remembered Colchinay.

The hair untangled itself, and he opened teary eyes, breathing carefully. He sat on a rock above the stream. Feast hall, guests, and Queen were gone. Colchinay stood before him sternly. He dropped his head in shame. She knelt before him, lifted his chin, and opened her hands in front of her face. A white butterfly rose up and flew sleepily into the darkening forest, followed by a swarm of midges. Dieter stared after them in amazement, and Colchinay burst into laughter. On the stone before him lay tiny dead birds and minnows, leaves and crushed berries. He looked like a little boy playing house in the woods.

She laughed at him all the way back to the clearing where the horse was tethered, and she talked to herself mirthfully. Dieter had no doubt that she was expressing the same opinions of him that he had heard from every dish of her feast. And those, he thought ruefully, were likely to be the only words of hers he would ever understand.

The horse, by now quite restless, splashed across the stream. As they rode on through the night Dieter apologized until Colchinay forgave him enough to rest her head on his back and fall asleep. The other man forlornly watched Dieter ride away from his invitation.

❧

Isabel Cole describes herself as "a proud graduate of Hunter College High School in New York". She started college this fall at the University of Chicago, works as an intern at Tor Books when she is in New York, and is working on a fantasy novel. She says, "I love to read in any genre, but I get most of my inspiration from fairy tales, music, and history." We have another story about Dieter coming up in a future issue of FANTASY Magazine.

Margaret Organ-Kean studied art and art history at Boston University, Central Washington University, and University of Washington. She has been a professional illustrator since she was fifteen.

Fandom? "I was raised on it," she tells us. Her mother was a librarian, and Margaret read a lot of fantasy as a child. She attended her first convention in 1986.

She works as a tech writer and systems analyst. "We all double up," she says.

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

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Artwork by Barb Armata

To Be The Best

by Margarita Serbiá

"We'll have wonderful children, you and I. Warlocks and a sorceress to tempt St. Anthony! Just think of it!"

But the tanner's promise so horrified Florinda she threw her apron over her face and ran into the crowd, leaving her basket of onions and mushrooms behind. Ordinarily she would have given the cheeky tanner a piece of her mind, but today she could not reveal her infirmity. Last night the witch of Grunia Mountain had laid another of her spells on Florinda, and she could not speak. Not a word or sound could cross her lips.

Maria della Gracia came up to her little cottage on the solitary hill overlooking the village later that afternoon, ostensibly to return her basket. She chatted amiably and shooed her brood into the chicken yard.

"Go sweep up the yard and bring in water, you. Make yourself useful or Florinda won't make cakes for you anymore."

Florinda busied herself emptying her basket, her face red with misery. When she first came to Cabo Duro, only Maria, the village midwife, had dared to talk to the young witch. Witchcraft was a lucrative trade, but lonesome. In all the countryside Florinda could trust only Maria with her troubles.

"Can't you talk?" Maria snapped. "Damn that witch to ash and bones. When is she going to leave you alone?"

Florinda sat down on her stool by the fire and threw her arms up in the air, an uncouth noise gurgling in her throat. Maria emptied her apron pockets of herbs and vials and went to work.

It was a lengthy process to reverse a spell as powerful as this one, requiring a potent brew and numerous ritual steps, and the importunities of Maria's six children made it even longer. In the end the two women made the children supper and sent them to sleep in Florinda's hayloft before Maria poured the brew down her throat and completed the incantations.

"Ah? Is it working? Say something, silly."

Florinda ventured to whisper the *Gloria Dei*. "It's back! My voice – oh, if you weren't here to help me, Maria, I don't know where I'd be."

"Don't thank me, thank the smith's wife for stealing the Grunia's gold plate and suffering the same spell. I never thought I'd need to use that cure again."

Although Maria never asked why Florinda deserved the witch's anger, Florinda knew Maria would not believe that she had never crossed that powerful sorceress. But night after night Florinda lay in dread under the covers, wondering if torture would befall her.

It would begin as a nightmare – racing down empty halls or falling from awful heights. Then an icy cold would envelop her, and fingers of the hardest steel would enter her body, rip it inside out, and take part of it away. The first time she lost her stomach. For two days she neither ate nor drank nor moved her bowels, until Maria recognized the cause of her agony and reversed the spell. The next time it was her eyes, so that she had to wait all day in darkness until the goatherd came by for his eggs and she could send for Maria. Another time there were only clean stumps where her ears had been. Today her voice had disappeared.

"What do they say about me?" Florinda asked. Luckily the rest of the town did not know yet of her misfortune, or they would make short work of a helpless witch.

Maria laughed. "They say Isaac the tanner is determined to marry you."

"Florinda has a lover. Florinda has a lover," chanted several of the children from the loft, and Maria picked up a stick and berated them until they were still again.

"Heaven help you, dear. Loneliness is far better than that dull, foul-looking beast!"

A small smile curled Florinda's lips, and Maria pulled her stool closer.

"You know something I missed, don't you, dear."

"It's a reverse glamour spell, Maria!"

"What? Are you sure?"

"He released the spell and showed me his true nature for a few seconds today."

"And he was beautiful underneath that dirty hide? Ah? And those missing teeth in the front – all there?"

Florinda only smiled. Maria frowned. "How could such a poor dolt get a spell that good? It costs quite a bit, that spell does. No, it would be best to be wary of him, my darling."

Florinda had to agree with Maria that caution was the best armor, so when she found a stack of rabbit pelts outside her door next morning she sent them back to the tanner with the goatherd's son, although reluctantly, since a fur lining on her cloak would have been wonderful for the winter. Soon after came the first frost, and the fall markets ended. The tanner returned to his hovel in the woods and Florinda returned to the ordinary tasks of salting fish and drying peas for the winter. The crippling spells disappeared, and she forgot completely about the witch of Grunia Mountain.

Then one wet and windy night, the witch came back to haunt her. In her dream she was drowning. Water covered her eyes and with every gasp more fetid water filled her mouth. She flailed her arms and legs, only to feel the weight of the water heavier and heavier upon her. As she lost consciousness, Florinda begged God to forgive her sins, since witches have a particularly difficult time in entering heaven, assuring Him that never once did she use her arts to hurt or maim or prevent children.

But before she could sink into blessed nothingness, Florinda felt a terrible wrench from her hair to her toes, a monstrous pull that stripped her of all her skin. When she awoke, she knocked the candle off its shelf and couldn't find it in the dark. Trembling, she lay in bed until the sun peeked under the shutters and she could see the candle in the dim light. When she picked it up, the little candle tumbled out of her hands. Florinda thought the cold made her hands clumsy, but when she put her feet on the rushes, she tumbled in a heap herself. Another few attempts to rise and Florinda knew what the Grunia had done. The witch had stripped her of the sense of touch. Without feeling her feet and hands were just bumbling clumps of clay.

She crawled to the fire and carefully relit it, and only knew the warmth of the flames when she saw herself stop shivering. She dressed herself awkwardly, unable to hook her bodice closed or braid her hair. She threw her dark cloak over her and determined to walk down to Maria's. Florinda was afraid to be alone in her state.

She walked slowly down the path slippery from last night's storm, step by arduous step, and every inch of ice or pebble in her path caused her to stumble and fall. By the time she reached the bottom, she was heaving with the effort, and her cloak was grey with mud. To her dismay, a dark and crumpled figure sat beside the path in the shadows of an overhang. As she neared him she recognized the tanner.

"Good day," he called out in his rumbling voice, and leaped out before her. Florinda almost fell over from the sudden fright.

"Let me help you," he said and steadied her. Then he looked straight into her eyes and the spell that made him look as dark and hairy as a bear slowly peeled away.

He was not the most handsome of men, with long and shaggy dark hair, but his face was pleasant and Florinda could not keep from smiling back at his broad smile and bright eyes. He was taller than as a shuffling tanner, and the hand on her arm was strong. Florinda felt her heart flutter, and in her surprise at this new feeling brushed her cloak clumsily.

The tanner stepped back politely, his disguise restored.

"What brings you out of the woods?" she said. "It'll be a cold winter. More bears and wolves than I've ever seen. Came down to the smith's to fix my traps."

"I see," she said. "Well, I must go. Good day to you, too."

"Your hair's unbound," the tanner said. "And your gown."

Florinda reddened at this familiarity.

"Don't misunderstand. It's just I'm afraid something's wrong – no, I know it is, don't ask how I know. But I'll certainly be glad to help you."

Florinda flung her head up. "I'll accept no help of that sort, sir. Good day."

The tanner kept pace with her. "Please. I have all the respect in the world for you. I know you need help," he said.

But she stumbled on as fast as she could manage until he left the path and crossed Pedro's pasture towards the village. Florinda finally reached Maria's cottage, and in the bustle and noise of her six children and the spell reversal rituals, she forgot about the tanner.

They celebrated her cure once the children were in bed with a little of Maria's Easter wine. Florinda was unwilling to walk home in the dark and spent the night on the hearth. The merry sound of the children's chatter and Maria's ranting woke her up the next morning.

"You must make sure they have clean water, did you hear me? Chickens must have clean water, and what's a witch without plenty of eggs for cures and spells? I get up there and find you've not kept them clean and watered, you won't sit down for a week, you hear?"

"Where's Eustacio going, Maria?"

"To your house. I've sent him to take care of it while you're gone."

"But I'll be back there in a little while. The chickens can wait."

"No, you're not. You're going to go find that witch." Florinda grabbed her skirt and dressed under the covers hurriedly.

"Find her? Go to Grunia Mountain? Why would I want to do that?"

Once set on an idea, Maria could persuade a coward to glory, and soon Florinda agreed to the insane plan. The witch was relentless, and each spell she inflicted more wicked than the last. If Florinda did not confront the sorceress, it could mean her death. Maria prepared Florinda with food and travelling clothes belonging to her late husband, and before she could reconsider, she was on her way to Grunia Mountain.

As young as she was, Florinda had travelled more than anyone in the village. She came from a gypsy family and had only stopped at one place long enough to learn witchcraft. She chose Cabo Duro as her home because it was close to the ocean and the King's highway both. But in all her travels she had never traversed woods. By nightfall Florinda was weary, sore and bruised, and worst of all, lost. She made camp in the first clearing she found and curled up to sleep in her blanket, too tired to light a fire.

That night she dreamt she climbed a sheer rock wall. She could feel her lungs agonizing as she pulled herself up inch by inch, and in her dream she even looked down and saw how perilous her perch was. Her head reeled, and she would have dropped, when something woke her.

Florinda sat up and leaned against a tree. The worst nightmare was having a spell overcome her this far from Maria. She tried not to fall asleep again, scratching together a small fire out of the brush she could reach in the dark, but she spent the rest of the night dozing off and on, too sleepy to stay awake.

The next day Florinda found a stream and decided to follow it down the mountain. It was easier to walk along the bank than through towering brush and trees. By mid-afternoon she came into a valley. As she ate by the stream, she studied the mountain wall around her. All the stories told of a peak so high it was always snow-covered, and so broad it looked like teeth grinding on each other. When she was done, she set out bravely to-

wards the east, to Grunia Mountain.

The change in her course had meant leaving the stream, and the rougher terrain of the heavy woods left Florinda bone-weary. At day's end she threw herself down at the foot of a large oak, too exhausted to worry about dreaming.

She returned to last night's dream at the moment where she had awakened, just a second before she would plummet down into nothingness. She felt the cold air rushing past her as she dropped, heard her screams, then awoke. This time she felt a presence at her side, a hand on her shoulder shaking her. She reached for the dagger at her belt, but the hand out of the night stayed her and placed something in her fist.

"Eat this. It tastes like spoiled fish, but it will keep you safe as you sleep."

Florinda stared long into the deep shadows, until they blurred into an eerie dance. She lit a small fire to see the object in her hand. It was a cake of dried herbs cooked together into a clump. She recognized one of the herbs as witch-bane, so she ate the cake. The rest of the night she slept soundly.

With a good rest Florinda went far next day towards her goal. She came to the foothills of the range and calculated that she would be at Grunia Mountain by nightfall. Instead she progressed barely a few miles from her noon resting place no matter how hard she pushed towards the open sky beyond the darkening gorge. When she could no longer fight the weariness, she stopped. The long trilling of a nightingale in the dusk, almost leaden, revealed the cause of her delay.

"Marvelous! Wonderful!" Florinda cried out. "She's using a slow spell! I've never heard of anyone with such talent. What a shame she's my enemy."

"That's certainly not your fault." A voice came out of the shadows by her, and Florinda whirled, her staff out before her.

Artwork by Barb Armata

The tanner stepped out of the darkness. "Come along. I could see you wouldn't get very far against her slow spell, so I've made camp for the night in a cave near here. Leave your pack, and she'll think you've stopped there, and stay close behind me. My aura will cover your presence."

Florinda stood openmouthed. "You followed me all the way!"

"Well, I had to. I feel sorry for what the witch has done to you."

"You? But it's my business alone. What do you have to do with it?"

The tanner spoke over his shoulder. "Hurry, will you? It'll be too dark to see soon."

Florinda threw down her pack and followed the swiftly disappearing tanner to a small cave, well hidden in the mountain side with a small fire by the opening. The discomfort of the smoke was worth feeling warm again. They ate the boiled rabbit Isaac had prepared in grateful silence. At last Florinda wiped her mouth on her shirt. "Tell me why you followed me," she said.

He pushed his unruly hair out of his eyes and smiled. "I've cast my fortune with every woman in the village, and my lot with you will be the best. Now my mother had different results, but you know that a mother can't see her son's bride with the same eye. She pictured a sorcerer's daughter for me, or, at least, a princess. But they were all such frail and silly women! You and I – we'll have fine, strong children."

"Yes, I know. Wizards and a sorceress to tempt St. Anthony. If you're looking for a brood mare –"

"Oh. I've done it again. Please understand I've spent most of my life alone with my mother and I don't know how to talk to women. Actually I've only been away to the Schola Magorum at Toledo."

"You studied to be a wizard?"

"I am a wizard, but the court life doesn't suit me. I want a large family and a cozy home. That's all I'm after. But my

mother – I broke her heart when I turned down the Count of Remigio's offer to marry his daughter and be the court wizard. Then I disguised myself as a tanner just to sit in the market and watch the village women walk by. Now there's a vision! You village women, you have round hips and round bre– I mean, you have flesh where it should be, and plenty of it!"

Florinda smiled and wrapped her cloak around the roundness of her body. Through the haze she heard the tanner rattle on about the witch not sensing their presence because of some incantation, even down to the steps he took, but Florinda drifted off to sleep. She was so tired she did not move an inch all night.

Before she set out the next day, Isaac bathed the soles of her boots in rabbit's blood and sprinkled garlic oil liberally over her cloak and pack. This he insisted would cover her scent and make it impossible for the witch to find her. Florinda ordered him not to follow her, since the witch was a powerful adversary and it was not his argument. Isaac agreed to wait till evening at the cave for her.

"I've come this far. I won't go back until I see you return," he said.

But in only a short time Florinda had too much on her mind to worry about Isaac. She came to the foot of Grunia Mountain, and in another hour discovered the waterfall that trickled over a rock ledge and into a deep pool. Behind this was the entrance to the witch's lair, according to Isaac. Florinda crept through the water and stood dripping on the other side in a large cavern. In her triumph, she forgot that the water would wash away her protective smells. A thunderous clap echoed down around her. A terrible, unseen force took her and hurled her against the rocks. Her poor body banged about from side to side, and Florinda heard her bones crunch, tasted the blood in her mouth, then saw no more.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Isaac cross-legged next to her. She sat up gingerly, expecting more pain than she found.

"I mended your bones," he said dourly. Florinda could still hear the waterfall close by. "Don't you think that fire will draw her attention?" Isaac laughed. "She knows every move you make. She knows I'm here. You needed the warmth."

"She's your mother, isn't she," Florinda said, and Isaac nodded mournfully. She fell back into a fitful sleep, and all the while Isaac sat brooding beside her.

"You shouldn't have followed me here," she said when she finally arose.

"She shouldn't have hurt you," he replied. "Now your destiny is surely mine, because neither she nor you will get me to leave. I tell you, there is no fury like a mother's towards the woman her son loves. She's not been kind to me, either, you know."

"Your mother," said Florinda, "has never been up against Florinda Caravallo. What right does she have to pass judgment on me? I was good enough for the Duke of Adenares to court, and I'm good enough for her son."

Then Florinda armed herself for battle. She took off her stained travelling clothes and dressed in the white robe and veil of the Schola Sagarum. She picked up her staff and wand and started up the dark cavern into the mountain.

Artwork by Barb Armata

They say that Grunia Mountain has never been the same since that day. The thunder could be heard for miles, and the lightning lit up the night sky so that the frightened villagers of Hermancillo, clear in the next valley, filled the church. The mountain moved and danced. So much snow and rock fell off its face that they now say the Grunia has a gap in its smile. Still Florinda advanced, deeper and deeper into the witch's lair.

At last there was a peaceful moment when Florinda could walk out onto a vast ledge that overlooked the valley below. She turned from side to side, searching for the witch, since she was not skilled in detecting persons by their aura, as the witch was – her true talent was in fertility. As she turned back towards the mountain, a blast of freezing air came down off the rocks above her and swept her away. Her fingernails broke and bled as she scrambled to hold onto the bare rock, smooth with ice. The vortex pulled her forward. She fell.

Then, with a jolt, she stopped in mid-air. Dimly Florinda saw the mottled peaks of rocks below her, the grey slab of ledge above her. Slowly a strong pull brought her up over the ledge, and down gently onto it. Above her stood Isaac, but it was an Isaac she did not recognize. His visage was fierce and stern, his mouth a tight grimace of anger.

"Mortal woman!" he cried out in the deep roar of a wizard, so that the words rolled and echoed around them, shattering the ice off the rocks. "Mortal woman, I will not let you hurt her."

Then he relaxed his stance, pulled her up and rushed her quickly before him. "We must hurry out of here," he whispered. "Now she'll be angry with me, and you've only seen the half of it."

They raced down hallways in the stone and crawled through tunnels, and ever after them crackled and spat bolts of pure energy that turned the air to noxious fumes, melted the rock, and twisted their senses awry, so that up was down and far near. Luckily Isaac knew the mountain, having spent his life there, and guided Florinda forward unerringly.

At last they came to an exit in the rock, a narrow crevice that served as door, and with one purpose they began to run. They heard a rumble behind them. Isaac turned.

"God's mercy, it's a fireball! Run!" He pushed Florinda forward, and she fell sprawling to the dirt. He stumbled over her but flung up his arm to deflect the fireball with a shouted command. It

passed over them and burst into the rock with a mighty crash. But the battle between Florinda and the witch had weakened the mountain in places. The rock began to quiver. Dust trickled on them.

Florinda swiveled around from where she lay and thrust her staff upright. Intent on reciting a ward spell, she did not see Isaac rise and head for the opening until it was too late to warn him. Down fell the mountain.

Florinda closed her eyes against the thick rock dust that filled the air. She concentrated on lifting, holding the wall of rock still under the control of her spell, then on bringing it slowly down. The effort was draining. It seemed nothing to fling lightning and firebolts. These spells propelled themselves, but to control a weight this heavy drew out of her every ounce of strength. When she heard the rocks tumble down safely beyond them, she lay dazed for a long time, until she remembered Isaac.

He lay out in the open, away from the mountain. Only an arm and his feet peeked out from under rocks. Florinda leaned against her staff and pried the rocks off him. She studied the damage when at last he was free.

He breathed, if little else. Ribs, leg, and arm were broken, and worst of all, his head so crushed both eyes almost came together as one. Florinda went to work methodically healing where she could find a hurt, pulling bones together like a seamstress with thread and cloth, only her tools were a small ash wand and her song. When she was done she carried the still unconscious Isaac into the forest, made a comfortable resting place for him under some pines, then lay her head on his chest and fell asleep.

It was dawn, and Florinda woke up chilled. She looked around and saw a huddled form on the edge of the trees. It was an old woman, so frail and small she looked like a head perched on a heap of clothes. Her crooked hands wrapped around a cane. When the old woman caught Florinda's gaze, she lifted her stick and pointed at Isaac.

"Dead, is he?" she said.

"Don't be frightened, grandmother. He's not dead yet. It would take more than hell's lord to take his life away from me."

The old woman shook with a laugh that was a hoarse wheeze, then coughed and spat on the ground. "She thinks I'm his grandmother. Look at me well, you goose of a girl!" and the old woman pounded the cane on the ground. "I'm

Artwork by Barb Armata

his mother. Old, am I? And old I was when I gave birth to a son. You may laugh. I did. Like Sarah when the angel foretold her pregnancy, I laughed." Then she extended a trembling hand, as if to touch Isaac, and quickly drew it back. "He's not half as handsome as his father, but not nearly as plain as I. There. I've said it, so it must be the truth." She shuffled her feet and scratched her forehead under her wimple.

"In the old days, I used to summon up a wizard once in a while – just for companionship, a game of cards, a little talk, you understand. Companionship, that was all I asked for. Then one night I summoned his father."

"'I have met my match,' he said, and his laughter filled my room with a gaiety it had never known. 'Never before has a summon spell overcome me. And for that I will leave you with a prize richer than many kingdoms. I'll leave you with a son.'

"I laughed. 'You would bed a woman as old and ugly as I?'

"'Is any woman ugly?' he said." The old woman wheezed and gasped again. "Now that was sorcery, don't you think?" Then the old woman's voice grew tender.

"In my anger I would have killed him. I gave him life, I thought, I could take it away. And then I saw that it was not so. It was not my gift. Even a witch cannot take the life of her child, so precious, so bright. It's just I wanted the best for him, to be a great wizard like his father."

"He already is," Florinda said.

"Can you carry him upstairs, do you think?" the old woman said suddenly.

"I will," Florinda said.

"Well then, hoist him up and get to it, before he catches his death on that cold ground. I can hardly see as it is, and I can look to his wounds better upstairs."

"I've looked to his wounds," Florinda said. "You tried, you mean. I'll tell you if you succeeded."

Florinda wrapped Isaac's arms around her neck and threw his weight on her back. "Lead on, grandmother."

"Grandmother again she says. Do you think I'll live long enough to see my grandchildren?"

"Did you ever think you'd live to have a son?"

"She gets wiser by the minute," the witch replied.

❧

Be wise...

SUBSCRIBE

Margarita Serbiá was born in 1950 in Puerto Rico, and came to this country to attend Marywood College (a fine Catholic institution, she says they might want her to add), where she finished a Bachelor's degree in Latin. She remained in Pennsylvania when she married in 1970. She completed a Master's degree in Medieval History at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

She came to Colorado several years ago, where her primary occupation has been in libraries (her present title is Interlibrary Loan Assistant), but her work experience also includes computer programming and writing for a weekly country newspaper.

Barb Armata's business card says "Illustrations of the Old, the Alien, and the everyday". A love of horses drew her into art, and André Norton drew her into sf & fantasy. She lives in the Berkshires and exhibits regularly at large NE sf cons.

All's Fair

by G. E. Gaines

Orim was in love. Passionately so.

For three weeks – THREE WEEKS – he had been carrying on a romance with Rean, a healthy, perfectly-plump-in-all-the-right-places giantess.

While giants aren't exactly gregarious, that doesn't mean they don't know their neighbors. So Orim had "known" Rean all his life, but hadn't really paid any attention to her until she popped him in the head with a twenty-pound stone because he had stolen one of her stolen sheep.

Quite sweet and romantic of her, really. As his head cleared and he watched her departing form (carrying the disagreed-upon sheep), Orim knew he was in love.

Once he could stand he proceeded in proper giant fashion to woo her. He snuck up on Rean, grabbed her and dragged her to his house, and tossed her in.

Well, she belted him once hard in the jaw, once harder in the gut, and once not so hard down where it could really hurt a man. As he lay there moaning in the dirt, she looked about, hands on her hips, humphed, kicked him a few more times – just to let him know she cared – then stalked off.

Orim watched that beloved departing rear in almost pure ecstasy. When he could manage to sit up, he considered his home and decided that the Love of his Life was right. It really wasn't much.

Giants aren't builders, but maintenance isn't beyond them, so Orim tried to fix it up some. But when the rest of the roof fell in, he gave up.

What was a house? She'd just have to take him as he was. So he hunted after her again.

This time Rean must have been looking forward to his attack. He wrapped his powerful arms about that wonderful torso and hugged hard and kissed harder. She wrapped her powerful arms about him and hugged just as hard and kissed just as hard. The feel of all that amassed flesh of delight turned Orim to water, upon which she kidney punched him (both kidneys), stomped on his right foot, then slammed both fists on opposite sides of his head. He managed to avoid another assault to that manly portion of his body, but left himself open to a one-two combination that resulted in so stunning him that he wasn't able to focus on that wonderful departing heinie.

What a woman!

He had to have her!

But she was no easy wrestle in the night. Not that fine specimen of womanhood.

So they courted. For Orim could see this was undoubtedly a relationship that could last the boring winter nights.

And Orim knew she was interested. The way she shifted her breasts against his chest when they would go into a clinch. The soft way her fingers moved along his cheek before she'd try to gouge an eye out. The way she would momentarily stiffen as he grabbed her buttocks to pull her to him.

And Orim knew that her opinion of him was increasing – what greater compliment could a man get than to be snuck up on and attacked by his Beloved?

Nor were all their encounters purely romantic cuddlings. Their relationship went even deeper that that. Into the second week Orim went down-mountain. A two day journey.

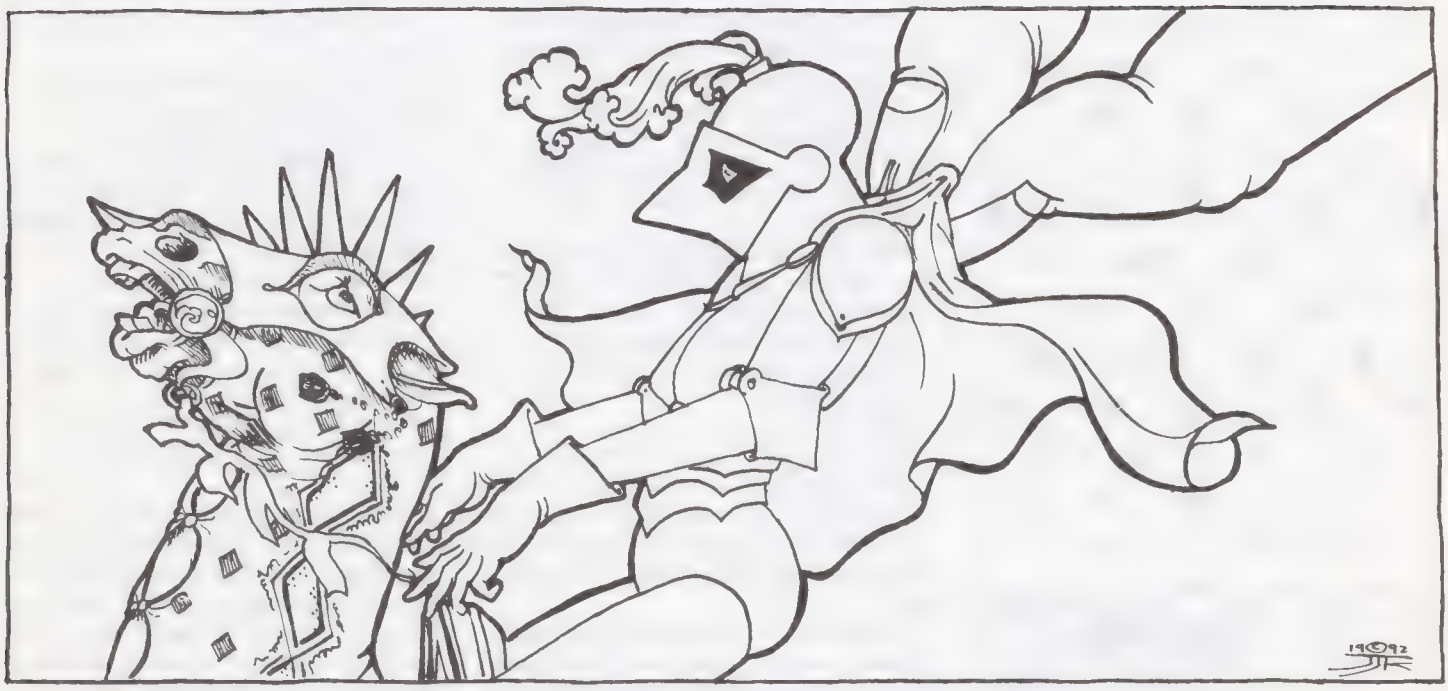
When he got back he found her and held out the two wiggling humans he had nabbed.

She boxed both his ears, kicked him in the stomach, smashed his face into the dirt, and told him never to go away again without telling her. She had worried! Then Rean slapped some sense into him and they went after the humans which he had dropped. (Orim always had been rather clumsy, but she didn't bash him any for that – love is blind.)

Later, in the moonlight as he cleaned his teeth with human rib, Orim had known pure bliss. Not only was Rean the woman of his dreams, she could cook perfectly too! A pair like them, both physically and culinarily compatible. It was too good to be true!

But she would not let their jointly-held passions consummate their love. Such restraint. It was an aspect of her personality he found he had no choice but to like. Giants are practical. Most things non-changeable can only be ignored, liked, or hated.

So, while he liked the self-will power of the Love of his Life, he hated the result, in that he was unable to fulfill his desires



Artwork by Janet Kramer

– desires which grew daily.

If there had been anyone else around to talk to, Orim might have figured out the cause of his frustration earlier. But once word gets out among giantkind that a romance is in progress, everyone for a couple hundred miles suddenly remembers a distant elderly relative long unvisited, or that sea air is good for you, or that such and such a kingdom hadn't been recently rampaged through.

So Orim pondered alone on the matter – he wasn't overly bright; as a giant you don't have to be – until he remembered it was the male giant's responsibility to provide home and hearth and the female giant's to provide family and warmth. Basic division of labor. But Orim had no house. No decent abode worthy of the Love of his Life.

Just as the Love of his Life was no easy wrestle, neither was she one to let him slack at his duty. What a woman! He would do as she desired.

"Honey cuddles!" Orim called from a safe distance, now completely familiar with her stone-throwing range.

"What is it?" she yelled back, still picking up a handy stone in case the opportunity to express her love presented itself.

"I've been thinking about finding a new house," Orim yelled.

"It's about time, rock head!"

Orim shivered in anticipated delight. "I could go down-mountain. There are some nice towers and castles down there. Or I could go up-mountain and find some deep cavernous cave. What is your adorable opinion?"

Rean stood there, pressed her lips, thought, considered, scratched her head with the rock, considered and thought, and thought and considered.

Orim was further seeing the advantages of long courtships – to learn so much about the Love of his Life! Not only was she demure, a good cook, and strong of will and body, but she could actually handle the difficult question he had posed – one impossible for him to figure out. In fact, he had hoped it would thoroughly stump her to the point she would concede to his affections. That she had considerable intellect could almost cover for the lack of fulfillment in their relationship.

So impressed he was by the Love of his Life, he was willing to wait there, staring at her lovely body at a distance – something totally impossible for him to manage very long before – until, after some hours, Rean made up her mind.

"Caves attract dragons and bears," she said. "And there's always small places the little ones could crawl into and get lost. So a cramped keep would be best. With a nice stone wall fence. No moat. Too dangerous for the children."

Such brains. Such logic! Then she threw the rock at him just to let him know she cared.

Orim nearly flew down the mountain. If he hadn't been a giant, he would have, but a good full-ton giant just plain can't fly.

Orim ignored the first few human habitations, being but farm houses and barns, and continued further into the flat lands. Not that it was really flat – but it wasn't hilly like the mountains. He found a fairly impressive two-story structure at one human town, but there was no wall, and at two stories it was much too low in the roof. So he went on.

Nothing would stop him from gaining his heart's desire. Not even three knights on horseback who appeared as he stomped down the path, which to humans was a road.

As the first knight, lance ready, rode hard towards him, Orim roared, causing the horse to sheer, and he knocked the knight off the horse. The second knight didn't come fast enough. Orim grabbed the lance, which the knight didn't have the sense to let go of, and threw both off to the side. That left the third knight, who looked first to the left, where the first knight had gone, then to the right, where the second knight had gone, then behind him, where obviously he was considering going.

All this required a few moments to pass and during this time Orim had a thought. Thoughts, original that is, were relatively rare for Orim, but love can drive a man to many things, including thinking. Since both the other knights weren't moving, Orim addressed the remaining knight, "Hey you! Yeah, you! Where're you from?"

"Huh. . . what. . . ummm. . . eh?"

Orim smiled to show he was friendly. The knight seemed his sort. "Yeah, where do you come from?"

"Eh. . . ummmm. . . what. . . huh?"

Artwork by Janet Kramer

"Really, I'm more interested in what where you come from has!" Orim said, moving towards him.

"Huh. . . what. . . ummm. . . eh?" The knight started his horse to backstep.

Orim narrowed the distance appreciably. "You do live in a castle, right?"

"Huh, yes. . . huh."

"It's got a good tall keep or palace in it. Say four or so stories. Nice and comfy?"

"What. . . of course. . .what. . . ."

And a proper decent stone wall?"

"Ummmm, sure. . . ummmm."

"Any moat?"

"Eh, yes."

"Darn, sounded great until that."

"Eh. . . ummmm. . . what. . . huh?" The horse backstepped into a tree, then gave a short hop forward, permitting Orim to grab the knight by an arm. The horse fled.

"You seem like a nice chap," Orim said honestly, holding him so he could look him in the face. "How about helping a fellow out? I have a bit of a problem."

"You have a problem?"

"My little darling won't, if you get what I mean, until I can provide a suitable home. A good castle or tower. At least four stories. And she'd like a stone wall with no moat. Not safe for the kiddies. Giants are lousy swimmers, you know."

"Actually, I didn't."

"Probably a lot I don't know about knights either. Except you roast up nicely. Do you know any good spot for me to begin my connubial bliss?"

"Huh. . . what. . . ummm. . . eh?"

"No? In that case. . . . "

"I'm thinking!" the knight half-yelled.

"All right." Orim was willing to wait for him to think. It wasn't like the knight weighed that much. He wasn't as pleasant to look at as the Love of his Life, but he figured he could be patient for an hour or so.

"No moat?" the knight asked after a few minutes.

"No moat."

"You mean water moats, don't you?"

"Are there other kinds?"

"Dry moats. A ditch with sharp spikes. If there's a lot of rain they might get a little water, but generally not enough to be considered a real water moat."

Orim grunted. He was learning more things about knights and moats. "Can the spikes be taken out?"

"Easily."

"Then a dry moat would be fine."

"Then you might be interested in the Black Knight's fortress."

The knight was a fast thinker too. "Good place?"

"Excellent. Withstood five major assaults in the last five years. . . ."

"Where?" Orim demanded.

"Go back down the road to the stream. Follow it 'til you're out of the forest, go east until you see it. Two towers and a main keep."

"How high's the main keep?"

"Four stories, and the tower's six."

A veritable palace. Orim dropped the knight in a crash of metal and started back down the road.

"And tell the bastard Sir Euestus sent you!..." the knight yelled after him.

Dead bodies, human and animal, lay scattered about. Several buildings still smoldered. The gate and portcullis lay about in splintered pieces. A few stragglers scurried off to hidey-holes upon their appearance – an extra advantage since they could be nibbled on at later convenience.

"So, what do you think, love kitten?" Orim asked. "It needs a little work, what with the spikes in the moat and walls inside all the buildings."

Rean didn't answer, her eyes just glowed, looking upon that half ruin which was perfectly capable of lasting a couple of giant generations. She gave him a roundhouse punch – which since he saw it coming meant he managed to keep to his feet.

"You romantic vixen! A formal ceremony then!" He popped her, grabbed a foot, and dragged her into the fortress. Once inside, she managed to grab a beam and slammed him good a few times, then jumped on top of him.

And, for giants, the earth really does move.

❧

G.E. Gaines has lived in Florida since the age of eight. Her first sale was in 1984. Since then she has sold a number of short fiction pieces. "I have some novels out collecting rejection slips and and am presently working on another one," she says, and adds that her junior high and high school teachers thought she would never do well "in anything...involved with spelling, grammar, punctuation, composition, or writing..." So her success shows what perseverance can win you.

Janet Kramer lives in San Carlos, California, where she works as a graphics artist for Sun MicroSystems. She has been displaying artwork at science fiction conventions since 1979.

The Last Word

Thanks to the following people for sending in bookstore names and addresses (names are in no particular order): Dr. Frederic R. Eichelman, Lisa A. Carlton, Elisabeth Waters, Robyn McGrew, Rima Saret, Kathryn Lacey, Susan L. Johnson, Lynne Armstrong-Jones, Julianne Revezzo, Alethea Eason, Dinah Faber, Gail J. Butler, Kate Hoppe, Karl Phouka Korendil, Gregory Koster, Shannon Muir, Janis A. Nay , Lynne Taylor-Fahnestalk, John Wilson, and Frank Gundleroy, Jr. These wonderful people sent me letters, photocopies of their local yellow pages with circles around likely bookstore names, business cards, bookmarks, and autograph party notices. Jane Robinson and Raul Reyes put together an information sheet and mailed it to all the suggested stores, so we hope some of them will respond with standing orders to receive every future issue of the magazine. (Unfortunately, the cost of doing business with Walden's, Dalton's, and Crown is too high; these people might give us large orders but they would also want returns privileges — you can read this to mean "the right to destroy unsold magazines and send back their covers". In the bitter reality of high printing and postage costs, this means we lose money on every copy we ship to them — so for the foreseeable future, *FANTASY Magazine* will be available only in specialty stores and by direct subscription.)

We've done another bookmark: if you subscribe, there should be one in the envelope with your copy. If you'd like more copies of the new bookmark, or one of the (now rare) copies of our earlier burgundy-colored bookmark for "Black Ribbon" in issue #14, please send us a short note and a stamped addressed envelope.

We're still looking for more bookstore names, so send them in. (If you know the bookstore's ZIP CODE and you are sending us info from the Yellow Pages, jot it down - that helps us, too.) Thanks again to all of you listed above!

Mary Frey, who wrote "The Sea King's Harp" in this issue, has revived the serial on Genie, a national computer network. Every day or two she posts another eight or ten paragraphs of a mystery, and it's fun to try to figure things out before the solution is reached. (In between, she keeps us up-to-date on the doings in the high school French classes she teaches; the day everyone celebrated French cooking sounded fabulous.) The Science Fiction section is reached by typing "M470;1" at any prompt, and then to reach Mary's topic, you type "SET 8" and then "READ 10 NEW". The magazine has a topic too: SET 5, then REA 5 NEW. For more information on GENIE in general, call them at 800-638-9636.

We have some treats in store for you in future issues: a new George Barr cover, an interview with Lois McMaster Bujold, stories by Jennifer Roberson, Rebecca Lyons, Pat Cirone, Lucy Cohen Schmeidler, and Jonathan Shipley (among others).

— *Rachel E. Holmen*

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As the legendary Phoenix awoke, so, too, did an ancient Chinese demon—and Los Angeles was destined to become the final battleground in their millenia-old war. And as earthquake and fire start to take their toll on the mortal world, four desperate people begin to suspect the terror that is about to engulf mankind.

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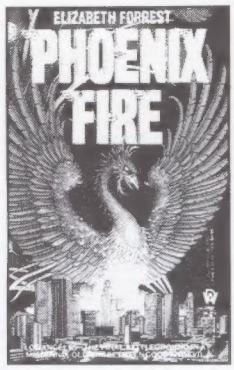

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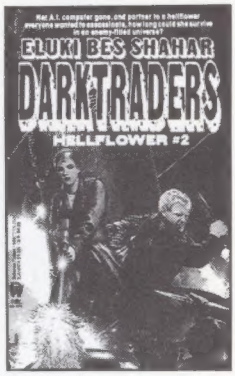

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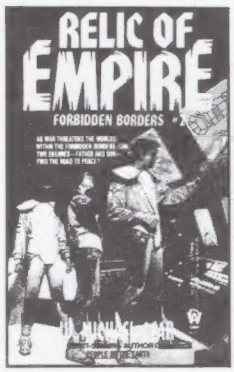

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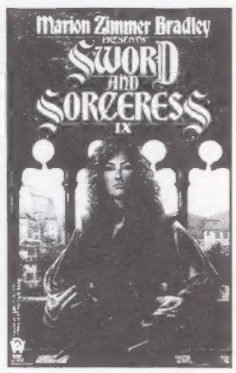

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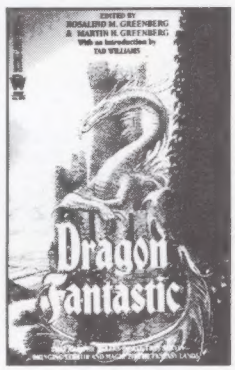

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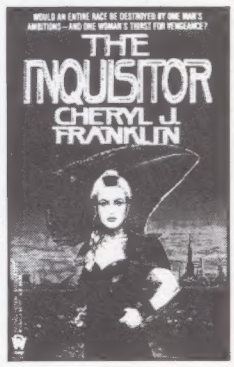

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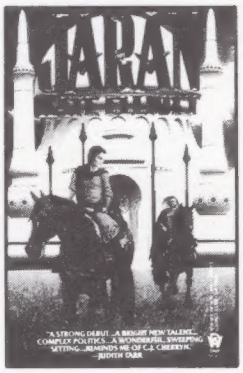

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